

**Conflict Studies Research Centre**



**Civil-Military Relations,  
State Strategies &  
Presidential Elections  
in Iran**

**Dr Babak Ganji**

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## **Key Points**

The candidacy of Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the former commander of the Law-Enforcement Force and Revolution Guards air force, has triggered major debate about civil-military relations in Iran. Opponents of the participation of former military commanders in politics have argued that it contravenes the late Ayatollah Khomeyni's ruling that the military must not interfere in politics. Four of the presidential candidates: Qalibaf; former C-in-C of the Guards Mohsen Reza'i; former director of the state radio and television Ali Larijani and mayor of Tehran Ahmadinezhad have served as military commanders. However, it is Qalibaf's candidacy which has been most controversial. Qalibaf has argued that reformism and fundamentalism are not necessarily incompatible. Qalibaf has expressed his preferences for "a mixed economy" and also sought to appeal to young religious people.

The current head of the Expediency Council and former president Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani has sought to improve his chances in the elections by arguing that only he is capable of preventing the militarization of the Iranian political system. Rafsanjani has moved closer to "reformist" political figures and some reformist journalists have been arguing that a major realignment of factions in Iran is in the offing.

It would be wrong to interpret this realignment in terms of "hard-liners" versus "pragmatists". Qalibaf has been trying to gain the hard-line conservative and radical votes. However, he has been vehemently opposed by the largest vigilante organization in the country, Ansar-e Hezbollah, which has accused Qalibaf and Rafsanjani's election headquarters of coordinating their strategies. The realignment in Iranian factional politics is closely intertwined with the dispute over the choice of grand strategy at the highest echelons of the state. The chief advocate of the unilateralist strategy, which places emphasis on unilaterally balancing the US and the EU in the region, is Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i. Khamene'i's main allies are Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani, Guards C-in-C Yahya Rahim-Safavi and his deputy Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr; Iran's negotiator Sirus Naseri, most members of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee and last but not least, the head of the Judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi-Shahrudi. The main advocates of the selective bandwagoning strategy are President Mohammad Khatami, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Hasan Rowhani and the head of the Expediency Council Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani and to some extent Rowhani have moved closer

to supporters of President Khatami in order to strengthen their positions in the expected confrontation with advocates of the balancing strategy. This dispute has also had an impact on Iran's team of nuclear negotiators.

The dispute over strategy was brought to a head when the Majlis passed a bill making it compulsory for the government to continue the nuclear enrichment programme. While Khamene'i's allies Shamkhani and Shahrudi welcomed the decision, Rowhani sought to portray the decision as a means of improving Iran's bargaining position vis-à-vis the EU. The EU-Iran talks in Geneva and the NPT review conference did not resolve the nuclear issue and the dispute over nuclear strategy in Iran continued. However, the main hallmark of the Iranian strategy remained the pursuit of the break out option within a multilateral framework. It is unlikely that the outcome of the presidential elections will alter this goal.

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# **Civil-Military Relations, State Strategies & Presidential Elections in Iran**

**Dr Babak Ganji**

This paper addresses the issue of civil-military relations and their implications for rival Iranian strategies. Unfortunately, there is only a very small English-language literature on civil-military relations in Iran. What is even more regrettable is that many studies of the Iranian military have failed to take account of the relationship between the military establishment and the state apparatus. A case in point is a recent study by Anthony Cordesman, a prominent expert on the Iranian military and nuclear programme.<sup>1</sup> Cordesman's study is valuable in terms of the level of detail it provides about Iranian equipment and various nuclear and WMD options which Iran may or may not pursue. However, it does not address fundamental questions such as the dispute over strategy in Iranian institutions. Another recent paper on the Iranian nuclear programme and its implications for US strategy in the region by a prominent non-proliferation expert, Henry Sokolski, fails to even take account of the Iranian debate over strategy.<sup>2</sup> This paper provides only a primer on rival Iranian strategies and the recent dispute over the issue of civil-military relations in Iran.

While there is a dispute over strategy in Iran, the participants in the debate have been given to obfuscation, not to mention demagoguery. Moreover, the dispute is so far-reaching that it has spread to virtually all the key state institutions such as the office of the supreme leader, the Majlis, the Judiciary, the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council. The candidacy of former commander of the Law-Enforcement Force, General Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, in the presidential elections has re-opened the debate about civil military relations in Iran. The former commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, Mohsen Reza'i, is also a candidate. Another, the former director of state radio and television, Ali Larijani, also served in the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps.<sup>3</sup> Qalibaf's candidacy is important not least because of fears that in the event of a state of emergency in the country, there might be a military crackdown in the country. This is particularly significant at a time when ethnic tensions are resurfacing in Iran. Qalibaf's candidacy is also important because of its implications for Iranian security policy in general and the Iranian nuclear programme in particular.

Significantly, radical and vigilante groups vehemently oppose Qalibaf. The most prominent vigilante group in Iran, Ansar-e Hezbollah, has accused Qalibaf of collaborating with Rafsanjani and charged that members of their campaign headquarters were dividing their time between the two headquarters. However, before we deal with these issues, it is important to put the issue of Qalibaf's candidacy in the context of civil military relations in Iran. Indeed, when one considers the involvement of Guards officials in politics, one realizes that much of the current debate is about current political rivalries rather than a genuine concern about the role of military in Iranian politics. It is also important to note that the

Guards' non-interference in politics on a number of occasions has also reflected its genuine political concerns.

## **The Role of the Military & Islamic Revolution Guards Corps in Politics**

This study does not aim to provide a comprehensive history of civil-military relations during the Islamic Republic. However, it is important to take note of several factors which have influenced the course of civil-military relations in the Islamic Republic. The involvement of military officers in politics can be traced to the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the first presidential elections after the revolution, Admiral Ahmad Madani, who had served as the governor of Khuzestan, stood as a candidate. Prior to his candidacy, Madani had successfully suppressed an uprising led by Ayatollah Shobeyr Khaqan. His candidacy has since been associated with attempts to stage a coup d'état in Iran. Prior to the elections, an Iranian middleman, Jamshid Hashemi, approached the Carter administration, arguing that he was in touch with Khomeini's brother, Ayatollah Pasandideh, who would try to persuade Khomeini to call for the release of the American hostages in Iran. Hashemi also wanted the CIA to fund Madani's presidential campaign. If Madani did not get elected, he would take military action to obtain the hostages' freedom. Madani, who is now in exile, later told US Congressional investigators that Hashemi did not represent him and that he had been lying to the US government.<sup>4</sup> The Madani episode is important because it indicates that relations between the military and the state have always been very complex in the Iranian state since 1979. Moreover, it also shows that contrary to the claims of Iranian commentators, the military had not eschewed interference in politics.

During the formative period of the Iranian state apparatus, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps emerged as a key arbiter in the power struggles among different factions. The main reason for the formation of the Guards was the clergy's distrust of the armed forces, who were viewed as pro-Shah and pro-American. Indeed, there were a number of coup attempts in 1980. The most serious was the Nozheh attempt which was supported by Iraq. Communist and leftist organizations which had infiltrated the Iranian military, including the Tudeh Party, were instrumental in revealing the Nozheh plot. The Guards played an important role in purging the armed forces of "counter-revolutionaries" and "agents of the US". Indeed, one reason that the Tudeh Party cooperated with the Guards in the purge of the armed forces was its belief that the clergy would not be able to govern the country.<sup>5</sup>

The Tudeh's policy was based on the recommendations of Rostislav Ulyanovskiy, a Middle East expert at the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Ulyanovskiy strongly advised the Tudeh to form an alliance with "progressive" and anti-American clerics.<sup>6</sup> Thus the Tudeh Party supported the purges carried out after the revolution, including the purge of the armed forces.<sup>7</sup>

After the first presidential elections which led to the victory of Abolhasan Bani-Sadr, the Guards refused to cooperate with Bani-Sadr's nominee for the post of Guards commander, Abbas Zamani, alias Abu Sharif. The Guards also refused to cooperate with the president's second nominee for the post.<sup>8</sup> In 1982 Abbas Zamani was found guilty of spying for the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> The Guards, however, continued to play a major role in Iranian politics. Not only were the Guards increasingly important in the Iran-Iraq war, but they also established close relations with such Islamist revolutionary organizations as the Lebanese Hizballah.

A major turning-point in the relationship between the Guards and the theocratic state was the Iran-Contra affair. Mehdi Hashemi, who was the brother of the then deputy leader, Ayatollah Montazeri, and in charge of the Guards department responsible for supporting Islamist movements, played the main role in revealing secret contacts between the Reagan administration and the Iranian regime.<sup>10</sup> Hashemi's arrest and execution were also important in terms of the instruments of coercion used by the regime to maintain its political control over the elite and society.

Khomeyni ordered the establishment of a Special Clerical Court which would be responsible for investigating "crimes" committed by the clergy.<sup>11</sup> The Hashemi case was dealt with by the then Intelligence Minister Mohammad Mohammadi-Reyshahri, who would later serve as the head of the Special Clerical Court. Hashemi's execution was followed by Montazeri's dismissal from his position. Montazeri has since become a dissident cleric and he has vehemently opposed the policies of Iran's current supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most important decisions taken in the post-Khomeini era was the unification of the regular army and the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps. The decision alienated the Guards and the Guards were reportedly involved in assassination attempts on Rafsanjani.<sup>13</sup> Rafsanjani was unpopular among the Guards because of his attempts to control their radicalism and also because of his attempts to amalgamate the regular armed forces and the Guards.<sup>14</sup> Former Guards officials also played an important role during Rafsanjani's presidency. Mohsen Rafiqdust, who served as Guards minister, a post which was abolished later, was appointed as the head of the country's largest and most powerful foundation, the Foundation for the Oppressed and the War Disabled. According to the constitution, the foundation is accountable to Iran's supreme leader. Therefore, the supreme leader approved of the involvement of a former military official in politics and economics. More importantly, Khamene'i intervened to ensure that Rafiqdust's term as the head of the foundation would be renewed. Under Rafiqdust, the foundation was implicated in the largest embezzlement scandal in the history of the Islamic Republic.<sup>15</sup>

During the Khatami presidency tensions between the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps and the chief executive were at their highest. The Guards high command, most notably the commander-in-chief of the Guards Maj-Gen Yahya Rahim-Safavi and his deputy, Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr, considered Khatami to be a threat to the revolution and its values. They believed that the entire "civil society" project would play into the hands of "the enemies of the revolution" and lead to the downfall of the system. The Guards high command was closely aligned with the powerful Islamic Coalition Society and they were reportedly engaged in agent provocateur activities to foment civil unrest to prepare the ground for declaring Khatami incompetent and ordering crackdown.<sup>16</sup> The issue was nearly brought to a head during the July 1999 student uprising when a group of Islamic Revolution Guards Corps commanders threatened to take the law into their hands if Khatami did not bring the unrest to an end. One of those commanders was Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf.

## **“Reformist” & “Dissident” Criticism of Qalibaf’s Candidacy**

Qalibaf, 43, is the youngest of the “eligible” presidential candidates. He was born in Mashhad in 1962. According to his biography, he “immersed himself in political and religious study” after finishing school. He has said that the Iranian revolution dramatically changed his life: “The revolution gave me the chance to be born again. In fact my generation was born during those years.”<sup>17</sup> Qalibaf, who is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, was appointed as the commander of the air force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps in 1997. He has been associated with the Guards’ attempt to undermine the presidency of Mohammad Khatami during the student unrest of 1999. In July 1999, Qalibaf was among the commanders who sent a letter to President Khatami calling on him to quell the unrest, threatening that if he did not do so they would take the law into their own hands.<sup>18</sup> Qalibaf has been criticized for his involvement in the affair. Indeed, in response to students, he said that he “would have dealt with the people who had poured out onto the streets. These people were not students but a bunch of thugs and hooligans.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite his military record, Qalibaf seems to be anxious to deny that his military training will influence his political decisions. He has said: “The military is an honourable profession. But I don’t consider myself a military man. I was a mojahed and fought in the Iran-Iraq war, and was present in the development and reconstruction period.”<sup>20</sup> Qalibaf has also sought to downplay his radical credentials and his relationship with the Guards perhaps in an effort to reach out to young religious people who are nevertheless tired of sloganeering. Commenting on political views, he said that he was “value-oriented” and committed to the principles of the Iranian revolution. However, he defined commitment to such principles as “pragmatism”.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Qalibaf’s candidacy has already been sharply criticized by “reformist” groups in Iran. Former Science Minister Mostafa Mo’in, also a candidate in the presidential elections, has already said that it was only “natural” that former military officials should feel close to the military because they had “a militaristic” outlook on society.<sup>22</sup>

Mo’in has declared that his main purpose was to help young people and women and eliminate social deprivation in the country.<sup>23</sup> To prove that he was serious, Mo’in appointed one of the most prominent reformist women in Iranian politics, Elahaheh Kula’i. Kula’i had also been highly critical of the conservatives national security policies, arguing that they had to broaden the base of the state in order to increase its legitimacy. Kula’i argued that those who opposed the introduction of democratic practices in Iran did not know anything about the outside world. “Development is impossible to achieve without constructive cooperation with the outside world. That is because we need the world and the world needs us.” Kula’i also charged that despite the conservatives’ repetitious statements about the importance of economic issues, they had done very little to formulate “rational” economic policies.<sup>24</sup> The daily Eqbal, which is run by Mostafa Mo’in, reported that even the official organ of the Islamic Coalition Party had expressed concern about the candidacy of former military officials.<sup>25</sup>

A reformist journalist, Hamid Reza Jala’ipur, himself a former Guards member, argued that what mattered was not the legality of the candidacy of former military officials. He said that Iran was not a democratic country and that political groups and parties were “not allowed to grow” or operate freely. He contended that party politics in the true sense did not really exist in Iran and that was why former military officials had stood as candidates in the elections. Jala’ipur also argued



that the election of a military official would have a negative impact on Iran's image abroad.<sup>26</sup>

Other reformists expressed views similar to those of Jala'ipur. Ali Mazru'i, who generally took a favourable view of the candidacy of former military officials in politics and made pre-agenda speeches about it in the sixth Majlis, argued that political parties must nominate their own candidates. Mazru'i argued that "the extremist wing of the conservative camp" had been encouraged by the results of the council elections and the seventh Majlis elections and that the candidacy of former military officials would serve the interests of the extremists. Mazru'i also believed that the candidacy of such figures would have a negative impact on Iranian interests abroad.

The Iran Freedom Movement, which is a semi-dissident organization, had a similar view on the candidacy of former military officials. The chairman of its political bureau, Mohammad Tavassoli, contended that their candidacy would reduce the level of participation in the presidential elections. Moreover, he argued that the election of a former military officer would damage Iran's national interests because it would intensify external pressures on Iran especially if the majority of voters decide to stay away from polling stations.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization & Militarization of Iranian Polity**

The Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization's (IRMO) criticism of the involvement of former military officials in politics was by far the sharpest. The organization declared that a paramilitary government was being established in Iran. This statement was particularly important given the origins of the organization. Originally, it was an alliance of six guerrilla organizations, which fought against the monarchy. After the revolution, the organization was unified by ayatollahs Mottahari and Beheshti and played a major role in taking US diplomats hostage in 1979. However, there was a dispute between the right and left wings of the organization, which came to the fore in 1986. After much bickering, the organization was dissolved following consultations between Khomeyni and his representative to the organization, Ayatollah Rasti-Kashani.

IRMO was revived in the early 1990s and the leadership was dominated by former left-wingers Behzad Nabavi and Mohammad Salamati. Nabavi argued that Khatami's election had served as a deterrent in the sense that it prevented the US from attacking Iran. Nabavi was no longer vehemently opposed to talks with the US and he even went so far as to declare that he was quite prepared to hold talks with US officials. As the "reformists'" influence waned, Nabavi began to argue that the very principle of republicanism was jeopardized in Iran.

The centrepiece of the IRMO's criticism of conservative groups was that they simply lacked the professional cadres necessary to run the country and that they would therefore have to rely upon military officials to govern. A member of the central council of the IRMO, Khalil Sazgarnezhad, argued that "a fundamentalist" government would not be able to work with cadres that served a "reformist" president and that the military would be the main protagonist in Iranian politics in the event of a conservative victory in the presidential elections.<sup>28</sup>

Sazgarnezhad lambasted the seventh Majlis, which is dominated by the conservatives, for sharply reducing the role of the legislature in policy-making, arguing that the most important preoccupation of the current Majlis was “the price of oranges”. He argued that even if conservative forces were faithful and religious, they would not be able to run the country because they were “militaristic and security-oriented”. He warned that in the event of a low turn-out in the presidential elections, the conservatives would win and they would have no choice but to form a “para-military” government.

Sazgarnezhad supported Rafsanjani’s candidacy, arguing that his participation would lead “second-rate figures” to leave the arena. He believed that Mo’in, Karrubi and Rafsanjani were the only candidates who could ensure the continuation of the reform process. He said that there were three groups of political figures which believed in dictatorship: those who believe in the relative superiority of despotism, those who saw themselves as the father of the nation and champions of the rights of “the poor and downtrodden” and those who believed that economic development and democracy were incompatible. Sazgarnezhad was also deeply worried that the people had lost confidence in the political process and become rather apathetic about the elections.<sup>29</sup>

The “reformists” were also concerned about the Guardian Council’s greater interference in vetting presidential candidates. There were reports that the secretary of the Guardian Council Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati had been a member of the board of governors of a conservative faction. President Khatami’s brother, Mohammad Reza Khatami, said: “A cross-section of the Guardian Council, which is mainly responsible for making the council’s decisions, consists of main elements of the right-wing faction.” Khatami said that candidates had been rejected in the seventh parliamentary elections to ensure that “a certain faction” would win the elections.<sup>30</sup> Former deputy interior minister for political affairs, Mostafa Tajzadeh, who is a bête noire of the conservatives, said that if true, this was “illegal and contrary to our national interests”. Tajzadeh said that “such people must retire as soon as possible”.<sup>31</sup>

On 5 May 2005, the Iranian Intelligence Minister Ali Yunesi indicated that the level of participation would not be particularly high. Commenting on the latest opinion poll conducted by the Intelligence Ministry, Yunesi said: “The latest poll predicts that the turn-out will be more than 50 per cent, which we hope will not fall. We therefore have to take measures to increase this figure.”<sup>32</sup> Despite the “reformists” misgivings about the role of the military in politics and the possibility of the intensification of external pressures on Iran, the commander-in-chief of the military, Maj-Gen Salimi, declared that the military was supported by “the entire nation”. Speaking during a visit to Ayatollah Khomeyni’s mausoleum, Salimi rejected the notion of “military aggression against Iran”, declaring: “We promise that no aggressor will be able to attack Iran, and if an aggressor wants to repeat the experience of the eight-year Holy Defence [Iran-Iraq war], it will not be able to achieve its aims easily.”<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, addressing worshippers prior to Tehran Friday-prayers, the commander of the army of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Brig-Gen Mohammadifar, declared that army personnel had been undergoing “guerrilla and partisan” warfare training and that such training had also been incorporated into the Peyrovan-e Velayat (followers of the guardianship) military exercises held in five provinces along the Iraqi border in December 2004.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as we shall see, Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator Sirius

Naseri also placed emphasis on the asymmetric dimension of Iranian regional strategy when commenting on the nuclear issue.

## Criticisms of US Policy

The debate about civil-military relations in Iran was taking place against a background of ethnic tensions in Khuzestan Province and reports of the stationing of US military units along Iran's border with Azerbaijan. According to some Iranian reports, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's visit to Baku was aimed at facilitating the deployment of rapid reaction units on the Iranian border. The Azeri ambassador to Iran Abbas Ali Hasanov stated that these reports were "lies". Hasanov stated that the Azeri constitution proscribed the deployment of foreign troops on Azeri territory.<sup>35</sup>

While Iranian conservatives were being sharply criticized by the "reformists" for facilitating the ascendancy of the military in Iranian politics, some Iranian conservative commentators sought to draw attention to the role of the US military in formulating the policies of the Bush administration. For example, writing in the daily Resalat, the organ of the strongly conservative Resalat Foundation, Mohammad Kazem Anbarlu'i criticized President George W Bush for his speech at a gathering of the Marines at Fort Hood. Anbarlu'i argued that Muslims considered US behaviour to be threatening and anti-Islamic, adding that such behaviour had nothing to do with the war on terror.

Anbarlu'i argued that the Bush administration's policies had radicalized the Islamic world, declaring: "Moderate and non-violent Muslims have accepted the way of those pursuing jihad and normal Muslims are being rapidly transformed from soft opponents to hard opponents."<sup>36</sup> Anbarlu'i criticized President Bush for saying that "the success of the democracy in Iraq sends a message from Beirut to Tehran", adding that the message had indeed been received, but it was a different kind of message. He contended that opinion polls in Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had shown that the peoples of those countries considered US policies to be "deceptive".<sup>37</sup>

However, it is important to note that despite conservative and radical commentators' criticisms of US policy, even the most radical candidates, Qalibaf and Ahmadinezhad, have been cautious about relations with the US. Qalibaf even disparaged those who sought to conduct propaganda campaigns about US-Iranian relations, arguing that the issue was too important to be dealt with in such fashion. "Our constitution has set no ban on the establishment of relations with other countries ... but we should consider our national interests and our mutual interests with different countries ... Restoring ties with the US cannot solve all problems ... but we should not blame a foreign enemy for our own inefficiencies ... The question of ties with the US cannot be a good theme for a propaganda campaign. The issue is related to our national security."<sup>38</sup>

Ahmadinezhad, who is also a former Islamic Revolution Guards Corps official, has been somewhat more radical in his pronouncements. "America's unilateral move to sever its ties with the Islamic Republic was aimed at destroying the Islamic revolution. And it is for the same reason that America is trying to re-establish relations with Iran. America was free to sever its ties with Iran. But it remains Iran's decision to re-establish relations with America. And such a decision must be made after carefully considering the national interest... The Islamic Republic does

not fear the prospect of renewing its relations with America. But we must carefully weight the pros and cons of such a decision, and the way to implement it – to avoid harming the nation’s independence, dignity and integrity.”<sup>39</sup>

Ethnic unrest in Iran’s province of Khuzestan is likely to have made Iranian officials even more suspicious of US policy towards their country. It is to this issue that we must now turn.

## **Unrest in Ahvaz**

The southern Iranian city of Ahvaz was the scene of unrest on 16 April 2005. The unrest reportedly broke out following the publication of “an old circular” on the web site of a former Vice-President Mohammad Ali Abtahi and President Khatami’s reference to it. According to an “informed source” who spoke to Baztab web site, which is managed by Omidvar Reza’i, the brother of the former C-in-C of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Mohsen Reza’i, three people were killed in clashes in Hamidiyeh district and a number of others were killed and injured in clashes in the Shalang Abad area of Ahvaz.<sup>40</sup>

However, the Iranian Interior Ministry stated that only one person had been killed.<sup>41</sup> An official in Khuzestan Province said that those who staged the riots had been influenced by “the media of secessionist groups close to Zionist circles”. It is noteworthy that the representative of the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i in Ahvaz had complained to the former commander of the Law-Enforcement Force about the security situation in the province. In fact, the week before the riots, the Law-Enforcement Force had seized weapons in Ahvaz, Dasht-e Azadegan and Khorramshahr. According to Baztab the weapons had been smuggled into Iran from Iraq. The Baztab report criticized Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyah TV stations for “trying to increase tensions in Khuzestan”. Baztab also criticized “pro-Saddam” forces for seeking to destabilize the area in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war. Al-Jazeera has reported the demands of the Democratic Front for the Arab People of Ahvaz which has called for putting an end to the “eighty-year military occupation of Khuzestan”. Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance suspended Al-Jazeera TV’s broadcasts “until the network’s role in the recent events in Ahvaz becomes clear.”<sup>42</sup>

The group has also claimed that the Iranian government is trying to transfer three million Arabs who live in Khuzestan to other parts of the country,<sup>43</sup> and that Iranian officials were “replacing Arab residents with other Iranians to change the demographic situation”. The group also called for the establishment of an independent state in Ahvaz.<sup>44</sup>

One exile group said that 30 people had been killed in the clashes. Speaking in London, a spokesman for the Ahvaz Arab People Democratic Popular Front, Abu Shaker al-Ahwazi, mentioned the names of 20 people who he said had been killed in the clashes. He said that dozens of people had been wounded and 300 others had been arrested. However, he claimed that the unrest was continuing. Moreover, Ahwazi claimed that troops from other parts of the country had been sent to the area after local forces, some of whom were Arabs, had refused to follow instructions. An official at a hospital in Ahvaz said that between 15 and 20 people had been killed.<sup>45</sup> However, Iranian Interior Ministry spokesman Jahanbakhsh Khanjani said that it was not true that 30 people had been killed or that the unrest was continuing.<sup>46</sup>

The acting deputy Khuzestan governor-general for political and security affairs, Gholamreza Shari'ati, said that the letter attributed to Abtahi was a fake and that Abtahi had denied that he had written it. Shari'ati claimed that similar letters had also been faked about the situation in other provinces, adding that "foreigners" had been making such efforts to reduce the people's participation in the upcoming presidential elections.<sup>47</sup>

Both "reformist" and "conservative" Iranian officials have said that the letter had been forged. Addressing governors of Iranian provinces, Interior Minister Abdolvahed Musavi-Lari said that "efforts to instigate ethnic clashes among Iranians" would fail. The Speaker of the Majlis Gholamali Haddad-Adel said that the letter was a forgery and that it indicated that there was "a conspiracy against the unity of the Iranian nation". Former Majlis Speaker Mehdi Karrubi said that "Khuzestan will always remain Khuzestan". He also called on the people to be "vigilant" against "foreigners" who sought to "provoke disputes" among Iranians.<sup>48</sup> The events in Ahvaz have already had a domino effect in Azerbaijan and Azeri secessionists have condemned Persian "chauvinism" and expressed support for the rioters.

It is surprising that Abtahi should be accused of forging such a letter. He is well known for his attempts to improve relations between Iranians and Arabs. He is also one of the most prominent political figures in the reformist camp and has been highly critical of attempts to muzzle the press or restrict civil liberties. That so many people chose to believe that Abtahi or Khatami would seek to change the demographic character of the area is highly significant and is indicative of Khatami's failure to convince people of the sincerity of his intentions.

The group which has called for the independence of Ahvaz acted amateurishly. It is highly unlikely that people in other parts of the country will be convinced that Abtahi was involved in an attempt to change the demographic character of Ahvaz. Moreover, the group has already overplayed its hand in the sense that it has posted messages from other minority groups, including Lors, calling for the secession of their own regions. This will make it easy for the authorities to quell the unrest. However, the unrest could play straight into the hands of the Islamic Coalition Party, the most conservative group in the Iranian political establishment.

Until recently, the party was strongly supporting the candidacy of Ali Larijani, a former director of the Iranian state radio and television, in the presidential elections. However, a senior party member said that in the event of the deterioration of the security situation in the country, the party would support the candidacy of General Qalibaf, the former commander of the Law-Enforcement Force.

Iranian Intelligence Minister Ali Yunesi sought to prepare the ground for a crackdown. Addressing a nationwide conference of prosecutors-general, Yunesi declared: "For the sake of security one should not resort to torture, or killing or suppression or oppression." He argued that the establishment of justice was the prerequisite to the establishment of security in the country. However, his remarks indicated that he had no intention of establishing a civil society in Iran despite the fact that he was a member of the cabinet of a president who had repeatedly claimed that he wanted social justice in Iran. Yunesi said: "Some people are trying to portray the Islamic Republic as an ineffective and failed system, and regrettably a major part of this propaganda is rooted in films made and views expressed inside the country. Rather than reproaching its enemies, the Islamic Republic of Iran

must reproach these friends who have made films or written articles by using the resources of the Islamic system.”<sup>49</sup>

On the issue of unrest in Khuzestan Province, Yunesi was even blunter. He declared that all of those “who provoked the people in the first days of the Khuzestan unrest” had been identified, adding that the majority of them had “committed crimes” in Khuzestan when Saddam Husayn was in power and that they had “caused the deaths of many of our Arab fellow countrymen”. Yunesi said that leaders of the rioters were people who had tried to change the name of the Persian Gulf.<sup>50</sup> “The people behind the unrest are a bunch of terrorists who are in Europe. Those who are in Iran have been identified and arrested.”<sup>51</sup>

By late May, it seemed that the regime had indeed succeeded in crushing the secessionist movement in Ahvaz. However, what the unrest demonstrated to hard-liners above all was the need for vigilance. The Ahvaz episode was not mentioned in the debates about the militarization of Iranian polity if only because all the parties in the debate saw the issue in terms of preserving Iran’s territorial integrity.

However, on 12 June four explosions shook Ahvaz. The bombs were reportedly placed in front of a house, in a toilet, in a vehicle and in the management and planning office in Ahvaz.<sup>52</sup> Iranian officials, most notably the spokesman for the Supreme National Security Council Ali Aqamohammadi and Intelligence Minister Ali Yunesi held former agents of the Iraqi Ba’th Party responsible for the explosions. Aqmohammadi argued that the bombings had been carried out to prevent Iranians from participating in the elections in large numbers. He predicted that such attacks might recur in the run-up to the elections and contended that foreign agents would resort to such tactics to undermine the electoral process in Iran.<sup>53</sup>

According to Aqamohammadi, former agents of the Iraqi Ba’th Party and who were now based in “Western countries” were responsible for the bombings, but he also said that they were not members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, Aqamohammadi held the US and the UK responsible for the explosions, arguing that the two countries had supported Iranian “counter-revolutionaries”. Aqamohammadi declared: “After the explosion in Qom a few days ago it became clear that several counter-revolutionary groups in Iraq had been dispatched to Iran from the region where the Americans and the British are deployed; some of these terrorists have been arrested.”<sup>55</sup> What the unrest demonstrated to hard-liners above all was the need for vigilance. The Ahvaz episode was not mentioned in the debates about the militarization of Iranian polity if only because all the parties in the debate saw the issue in terms of preserving Iran’s territorial integrity. However, the unrest in Ahvaz and the increasing militarization of the polity were such important issues that they contributed to a factional realignment in Iranian politics. Moreover, a number of candidates, most notably, Mohsen Reza’i, stressed the need for decentralizing the Iranian state. Reza’i went so far as to call for the creation of a federal state comprising 10 states. At the same time, he stressed the importance of nationalism, arguing that the Iranian state had ignored the importance of nationalism since the revolution. A number of other candidates also called for improving relations between the central government and ethnic minorities. General Qalibaf called for better relations with Iran’s Sunni community,<sup>56</sup> while Ahmadinezhad promised that, if elected, he would move the seat of government to a different province on a rotatory basis.<sup>57</sup>

Thus the impact of the unrest in Ahvaz was such that it led officials to rethink their strategy of centralization. Had the threat not been perceived as a serious one,

Reza'i would not have contemplated the possibility of forming a federal state. However, in terms of its implications for domestic Iranian politics, the unrest in Ahvaz had a somewhat paradoxical effect on various groups' choice of political strategy. While most officials blamed the unrest and the explosions on foreign agents, the evidence suggests that Mohsen Reza'i saw the explosions in terms of a domestic agent provocateur operation. The web site Baztab, which usually reflects the views of Reza'i's brother, Omidvar Reza'i, as well as Reza'i himself, reported that a "security expert" had said that a Salafist group, Forqan, was responsible for the explosions in Ahvaz, Tehran, Qom and Zahedan. Above all, the "expert" alleged that the campaign headquarters of one of the candidates in Ahvaz had foreknowledge of the explosions and that the matter would be investigated.<sup>58</sup> The use of the term Salafist to refer to Forqan was particularly interesting and it added a new dimension to the Iranian media coverage of the explosions. In 1979, Forqan was held responsible for assassinating the then chief of the Joint Staff of the Iranian armed forces, General Valiollah Qarani, and one of Khomeyni's closest advisers, Ayatollah Morteza Mottahari. At the time, Forqan was said to have borrowed heavily from the ideology of Ali Shari'ati who was, arguably, one of the main architects of the Iranian revolution, despite his death under mysterious circumstances in 1977.<sup>59</sup> Shari'ati's ideology was based on the notion of reconciling Islam and Marxism and he was an advocate of Islamic socialism. He had certainly nothing in common with advocates of Salafist Islam. Indeed, the use of the term Salafist in the Iranian context was new, because previously the group had been described as "terrorist", "extremist" or "deviationist".<sup>60</sup>

It remains to be seen whether Forqan has re-emerged or whether some Iranian officials are trying to prepare the ground for a crackdown on Sunni groups by linking them to Forqan. Baztab has certainly not been renowned for the accuracy of its reports in the past. However, as far as the Ahvaz explosions were concerned, intelligence and security officials clearly took advantage of the explosions to call for extra vigilance and maximum participation in the elections. Paradoxically, the increasing concern with security measures, not to mention the participation of four former Guards officials in the elections, enabled the head of the Expediency Council, Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, to move closer to "reformists" in an effort to shore up his domestic position. Rafsanjani's tactical manoeuvres led to a partial realignment in Iranian domestic politics which may, in the medium term, have a discernible effect on Iranian foreign policy. However, the increasing militarization was such an important issue that it contributed to a factional realignment in Iranian politics. The realignment was the result of Rafsanjani's efforts to strengthen his power base in the run-up to the elections. Rafsanjani, who delayed the announcement of his candidacy despite speculation about his chances, sought to reach out to President Khatami's supporters in an effort to prepare for the looming confrontation with Larijani and the Islamic Coalition Society. He sought to portray himself as a centre-right politician who was interested in pursuing the nuclear programme, reaching a modus vivendi with the US and foreign investment. However, after the debate about Qalibaf's candidacy, Rafsanjani also tried to cultivate Khatami's supporters by arguing that he was the only official who was capable of preventing the militarization of Iranian polity.

## Rafsanjani: Opponent of “Militarization”?

Despite radical groups’ allegations that Qalibaf and Rafsanjani were collaborating, Aftab News Agency, which is affiliated with the Expediency Council, continued to criticize Qalibaf rather sharply. Indeed, one of Rafsanjani’s advisers told AFP that Rafsanjani would concentrate on ensuring that “people’s lives would not be militarized”.<sup>61</sup> After Ahmad Tavakkoli’s decision to withdraw from the race, the Rafsanjani camp feared that Qalibaf would emerge as the Fundamentalists’ leading candidate. It reported that Qalibaf was confident that the Fundamentalists would not be able to reject his nomination easily.

Ali Larijani had already said that he might withdraw from the race to unify the ranks of the Fundamentalists. Another leading conservative candidate, former Foreign Minister and current international affairs adviser to Khamene’i, Ali Akbar Velayati, said that he would not withdraw from the race under any circumstances. The Rafsanjani camp concluded that Velayati was Qalibaf’s only “intra-factional” rival.<sup>62</sup>

By early May, there were differences of opinion within the Rafsanjani camp as to who would be his main rivals in the conservative camp. These differences were reflected in Aftab News Agency’s coverage of the divisions in the ranks of the conservatives. Some had come to the conclusion that Larijani and Qalibaf would be Rafsanjani’s main rivals.<sup>63</sup> Others, however, believed that Larijani was “the unluckiest of Fundamentalist candidates” because he had been shunned by an important conservative faction, the Developers Coalition, despite his efforts to gain their support. Moreover, the coordination council of the Fundamentalists had been raising questions about his candidacy.<sup>64</sup>

Significantly, Aftab News Agency indicated that in the event of Rafsanjani’s decision to refrain from standing in the elections, he might support Velayati. However, the Rafsanjani camp seemed to be worried that even if Velayati refrained from standing against Qalibaf, he was acting as though “the game” would be over soon.<sup>65</sup>

Aftab News Agency was also highly critical of the activities of the former commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps in Qazvin who had declared that he was trying to prevent military officials from interfering in politics. It made allegations about his past economic activities and raised questions about his commitment to keeping the military out of politics. The news agency also accused him of being responsible for “the psychological warfare operations of a reformist candidate” and that his involvement in the election campaign was aimed at undermining Qalibaf.<sup>66</sup>

However, by mid-May there was even speculation about the possible composition of a Rafsanjani cabinet. The daily *Siyasat-e Ruz*, which is close to conservatives such as Ali Larijani, speculated that a Rafsanjani cabinet would be a coalition of “reformists” and conservatives and that such figures as Majid Ansari, Mohammad Atrianfar, Taha Hashemi and Amir Mohebbian would be members. Mohebbian and Hashemi issued denials. However, Hashemi’s comments regarding the appointment of cabinet members sounded as if Rafsanajni’s election was a foregone conclusion.<sup>67</sup> The report on Hashemi and Mohebbian was particularly interesting because both were among the most prominent conservative political commentators in the country. Both were also seen as political figures who sought to establish a dialogue with the “reformists”. One of the most prominent reformist figures, Ali Reza Raja’i, who is Mo’i’n’s supporter, argued that “the most important result of Hashemi’s participation was that it undermined the confidence of the right-wing faction and,



in fact, caused more serious fissures among them. One could also argue that it ensured that the fissures among them would be revealed earlier.”<sup>68</sup> Raja’i contended that the “traditional” and “modernist” elements of both right and left-wing factions had broken away from their natural constituencies. However, Raja’i explained the shift in terms of long-term changes in domestic Iranian politics. He argued that “orthodox” left-wing groups might move closer to the right, but he discounted the possibility of a long-term shift from that the right to the left. He contended that right-wing factions in Iran had always been “undemocratic”, but he did qualify his remarks by saying that the right would “very gradually” seek to experiment with democratic ideas.<sup>69</sup> Rafsanjani’s Aftab news agency was reporting that a smear campaign against Rafsanjani was under way.

### **Hard-Line Vigilante, Conservative & “Reformist” Opposition to Qalibaf**

Qalibaf was sharply criticized by both the radicals and “reformists” for declaring his candidacy. Their opposition to Qalibaf’s candidacy started a major debate about civil-military relations in Iran. Essentially, Qalibaf, former C-in-C of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Mohsen Reza’i and the mayor of Tehran Ahmadinezhad were competing for the votes of young religious people. Despite the controversy generated as a result of Qalibaf’s candidacy, it is important to note that the most important vigilante group, Ansar-e Hezbollah, which supported Ahmadinezhad and was close to hard-liners in the Intelligence Ministry and the Basij Resistance Force, vehemently opposed Qalibaf. In fact, the Ansar-e Hezbollah’s web sites posted stories suggesting that Qalibaf and Rafsanjani were in cahoots and that the same people were working for their web sites.

Ansar-e Hezbollah supported the candidacy of the mayor of Tehran Ahmadinezhad. Reportedly, a member of the coordination council of the conservative camp asked Ahmadinezhad to withdraw from the race. Ahmadinezhad, however, responded that he would wait until the last minute and that if Rafsanjani did not stand, he would not stand either, but if did, then, “the circumstances would change”.<sup>70</sup> Ahmadinezhad claimed that his main purpose was to establish justice in Iran and that he was not interested in furthering his personal interests. Therefore, he would not withdraw from the race.<sup>71</sup>

The spokesman for Mohzen Reza’i’s campaign rejected speculation that Reza’i would withdraw in favour of Qalibaf. The spokesman, Ali Ahmadi, went so far as to argue that Qalibaf was not even one of the main competitors in the elections.<sup>72</sup> Ahmadi claimed that the main competitors were Rafsanjani and Karrubi, and that Friday-prayer leaders supported Rafsanjani. Indeed, Ahmadi claimed that the Coordinating Council of the Forces Following the Line of the Imam and the Leadership, which was close to the Islamic Coalition Society, would distance itself from Ali Larijani and support Rafsanjani because, otherwise, it would be defeated in the elections and the number of its votes would be reduced from seven million to one million. At the same time, Ahmadi claimed that if the Coordination Council of the Forces Following the Line of the Imam and the Leadership decided to support Reza’i, then Rafsanjani would withdraw from the race in favour of Reza’i.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, one of the founders of the Lebanese Hizballah, Ali Akbar Mohtashamipur, who was also one of the leaders of the “reformist” faction in the sixth Majlis, sharply criticized former military officials for their participation in the elections. In the seventh presidential elections, Mohtashamipur is the head of former Majlis Speaker

Mehdi Karrubi's election headquarters. Mohtashamipur declared that military officials did not represent the people and would, in fact, prevent the people from determining their own destiny. He said that presidential candidates had to have a grasp of domestic and foreign policy issues and be good managers and that military officials lacked such character traits. He then lambasted former military officials, contending that they would use "coercion", "violence" and "bayonets" to rule over the country.<sup>74</sup>

In an effort to counter vigilante and hard-line criticism of his candidacy, Qalibaf declared that he sought to ensure that the prevailing cultural norms in the country will be "basiji" ones. He defined the basiji culture as one which put the interests of the Islamic community before one's personal interests.<sup>75</sup>

Qalibaf, however, was increasingly criticized for trying to impose military rule on the country. Particularly sharp was Mohammad Ebrahim Asgharzadeh's criticism of his role. Asgharzadeh had been a prominent member of the Students Following the Line of the Imam who led the attack on the US embassy in 1979 and took US diplomats hostage. Asgharzadeh sought to occupy the middle ground between the reformists and the conservatives. He sharply criticized "the leadership" of the reform movement, declaring that his participation in the elections would not reduce the number of votes cast for the reformists. At the same time, Asgharzadeh lambasted Iranian military leaders for arguing that Iraq would be "a quagmire" for the US, adding that this showed "how weak their analysis of political and international issues really was".<sup>76</sup>

Referring to the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah Pahlavi, he declared: "Reza Khan was not the first, nor the last military official to come to power in this country. However, despite all his power, he turned over the country to foreigners over a period of three days." Without naming Qalibaf, Asgharzadeh said that although military officials had played a prominent role in the victory of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war: "Military officials should not think that they can be present in the political arena just because the people expressed their gratitude to military officials after the victory of the revolution."<sup>77</sup>

Asgharzadeh's comments on the role of the election supervisory body, the Guardian Council, which the reformists have criticized for rejecting their candidates, indicate that he feared that Qalibaf would be approved by the Guardian Council and be elected. He said that the Guardian Council must eschew "undemocratic practices".<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Asgharzadeh went so far as to call on President Khatami to stage a sit-in at the Guardian Council's headquarters to deliver this message to members of the body. He lambasted Khatami, saying that the president could not abdicate his responsibilities by arguing that the Guardian Council was responsible for ensuring the fairness of the elections. He declared that if the president could not ensure that, he would certainly not be able to defend the rights of the people. At the same time, he criticized the Guardian Council, saying that if it failed to hold fair elections, its role would be called into question because it will have failed to "safeguard the rights of the people".<sup>79</sup>

One of Qalibaf's advisers, Mohsen Bahrami, argued that both right and left-wing "extremists" opposed Qalibaf's "militarism" because Qalibaf did not have any other "weaknesses". He claimed that Qalibaf was very popular among "moderates", be they "reformists" or "fundamentalists". He also called on whoever was nominated as the conservatives' main candidate to withdraw from the race in favour of Qalibaf.<sup>80</sup>

## Implications of Militarization of Iranian Polity for Nuclear Talks

Qalibaf is unlikely to win the elections in June. However, the Qalibaf and Reza'i candidacies are likely to have a lasting impact on Iranian state strategies in the future. In an earlier CSRC paper,<sup>81</sup> the author has argued at length that the main strategic debate in Iran is between advocates of a bomb in the basement strategy, who favour selective bandwagoning with the US on Iraq and Afghanistan as a means of facilitating Iran's pursuit of the nuclear option, and advocates of self-reliance and weaponization who believe in the pursuit of an asymmetric strategy aimed at driving the US from the region.

The Qalibaf and Reza'i candidacies, as well as fears of an Israeli pre-emptive attack on Iranian nuclear installations, have strengthened advocates of asymmetric strategies. For example, commenting on Israel's purchase of "bunker-buster" missiles, Iranian Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani declared: "Israel is an evil regime. It's very unfortunate that this regime is continuously supported by the US and the latter views the former's security as being in its interests. As far as the impact of these measures on our nuclear installations is concerned, we have never ruled out that we may be the target of a first strike. However, our response to the attackers will be very firm."<sup>82</sup>

At the same time, Shamkhani said that Iran's "enemies" had not been able to carry out their threats because Iran had allowed IAEA inspectors to visit its installations. At the same time, Shamkhani said that the production of the Shahab-3 missile would not stop, declaring: "There is a Shahab-3 missile embedded in every Iranian."<sup>83</sup> However, the main new development for some reformist media outlets was the question of Iran's production of new weapons systems to jam US electronic and satellite systems "for up to six months".

Shamkhani claimed that Iran was pursuing a defensive policy, declaring: "American propaganda policy is aimed at painting a false and frightening picture of Iran. We, for example, never even think about targeting the United States of America's electricity installations. Such a thing does not have a place in our defence strategy and we are not pursuing this thing either. However, it seems that neoconservative propaganda is trying to inculcate in the American people the idea that Iran is a security issue. However, we don't have any problems with the American people."<sup>84</sup>

The failure of nuclear talks between the EU and Iran led Iranian officials to threaten to resume the enrichment of uranium. Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, who defined the parameters of Iranian strategy, made clear that state strategies had nothing to do with the presidential election campaign. Moreover, Khamene'i put presidential hopefuls on notice that they would not be allowed to reformulate Iranian nuclear strategy. Speaking in Kerman Province, Khamene'i declared: "The spokesmen of arrogance declare: We're waiting for the Iranian elections, then, we'll decide about the question of peaceful nuclear energy in Iran. What do the Iranian elections have to do with you? The elections belong to the Iranian nation. Anyone who comes to power through these elections and becomes the people's president will neither want to nor be allowed by this nation to take a single step against the people's interests."<sup>85</sup>

Significantly, Aftab News Agency, which is close to Iran's chief negotiator Hasan Rowhani, published a report by *Financial Times* in bold letters, saying: "The threat to start enrichment was aimed at drawing America into the talks."<sup>86</sup> Another signal

to the US may have been the release of Abbas Abdi who was jailed for releasing an opinion poll in late 2002 saying that 74 per cent of Iranians wanted Iran's leaders to hold a dialogue with Washington.

At the time, Abdi's arrest was interpreted as an example of the tectonic shift in Iranian politics. In 1979, Abdi was a leader of the Students Following the Line of the Imam who took US diplomats hostage. In 2003, Abdi was given a four and a half-year prison sentence on charges which included "providing information to the enemies" of the Islamic Republic. However, on 13 May 2005, Iran's Supreme Court announced that Abdi was not guilty of "spying". Significantly, Abdi's lawyer Saleh Nikbaht declared that "the Supreme Court, in an unprecedented decision, declared that Iran and the United States were not in a state of hostilities and the differences between Iran and United States were political differences".<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, Nikbaht declared that the five Supreme Court judges were "unanimous" in their verdict. However, even if Rafsanjani thought that the threat was aimed at drawing the US into the talks, the evidence suggests that Khamene'i and his allies were very serious about resuming enrichment. In fact, Rafsanjani's ally, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Hasan Rowhani, declared on 12 May that Iran was absolutely serious about continuing the enrichment programme and that it would withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), if necessary, in order to do so.

At the same time, Iran took two measures to deter an Israeli or US attack. Firstly, one of Iran's negotiators, Sirius Naseri, who seems to be representing Khamene'i's viewpoints, threatened to link the nuclear issue to regional conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan. Secondly, the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced that Iran was studying the possibility of acceding to the Additional Protocol to the NPT. As we shall see, the move to accede to the Additional Protocol was opposed in the Majlis by MPs who favoured the continuation of the enrichment process. However, Hasan Rowhani enunciated Iran's basic position later on, indicating that as far as advocates of bomb in the basement were concerned, the notion was not at all incompatible with accession to the Additional Protocol.

### **Sirius Naseri Spokesman for Asymmetric Strategy?**

However, Sirius Naseri indicated that there were vast differences between him and the Rowhani-Rafsanjani group. Naseri said that Iran could not "suspend its nuclear activities for ever", adding that in the past Westerners had even tried to stop the Iranian reactor programme.<sup>88</sup> He said that perhaps Iran could have discussed the issue of supply of nuclear fuel 10 years ago, but that this was not possible today. Naseri said that Iran had "a bitter experience" with Westerners and that it would not believe any of their guarantees; Iran would encounter problems and incur certain costs, but in the end the EU and the US would have no choice but to negotiate. One day the issue would have to be resolved, but the Iranian programme would go ahead nevertheless. He said that Iran had an indigenous programme and it did not need to be dependent on others.

Naseri said that Iran's negotiations with the EU had gone on long enough and that the issue had to be brought to a head. "We do not have much time for them and that is only rational." He said that Iran's plans had four parts and consisted of four stages. He said that Iran had not asked the Europeans to make a decision on the spot; Iran wanted to end the first stage of the talks, but the Europeans had

interpreted the Iranian demand as an ultimatum. Commenting on the London talks, Naseri said that some progress had been made on political and economic matters but it was a “strange meeting” because the participants could not sum up the issues discussed and make a decision. He argued that as far as the nuclear issue was concerned, the Europeans’ commitments included all areas and stages, including gaining access to nuclear energy, whilst the Iranians had tried to focus on Natanz and Esfahan and that they had started off with Esfahan because “it was easier” to do so.

Perhaps the Europeans did not have the capability to make a decision and “Iran cannot pay for their political incompetence”.<sup>89</sup> Naseri said that in 10 or 15 years time, Iran would have the capability to export oil, gas and nuclear energy. He argued that the notion of Iran’s agreeing to long-term suspension or cessation of enrichment was “foolish, baseless, wrong and irrational ... Naturally, the negotiations will be a challenge. They will try to exert pressure, make threats, bluff or even carry out some of their threats.”<sup>90</sup>

Naseri linked the nuclear issue to the situation in Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan. He contended that “counter-threats” had been planned in advance, adding that “we will not make threats first”. However, he also declared: “There is nothing separating us from France in Lebanon. That is because of our position in Lebanon. So France may encounter more problems in Lebanon. The same is true of our position vis-à-vis Britain or even America in Iraq.”<sup>91</sup> Naseri’s threat to link the nuclear issue to regional conflicts had enormous implications for the US and the EU’s regional strategies. Since the formation of the Iraqi government suicide attacks and terrorism had escalated in Iraq. However, the majority of Shi’is supported the election process and the Shi’is alliance with the Kurds had isolated Muqtada al-Sadr and prevented the outbreak of a civil war in the country.

Naseri’s threat suggested that Iran would use its influence with the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq and undermine the Iraqi government. In Lebanon, a similar process was under way. Iran’s closest ally in Lebanon, Hizballah, had already vehemently opposed Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon. However, Hizballah leaders had also declared that their group was not a terrorist organization or a militia group. A number of explosions had occurred in Christian neighbourhoods, but General Michel Aoun who had been living in exile returned to Lebanon in May and began to hold talks with Hizballah leaders in an effort to reach a modus vivendi with them. The spectre of a conflagration in Lebanon, which is what Naseri implied, could once again polarize the region with different countries intervening on the side of various Lebanese groups.

Moreover, as we will see later, the asymmetric strategy constituted the core of former Guards C-in-C Mohsen Reza’i’s campaign platform.

## **Additional Protocol & Resumption of Enrichment**

The other component of the Iranian strategy was accession to the Additional Protocol and the gradual resumption of enrichment. On this issue, too, Iranian officials were careful to repeat Khamene’i’s statement that the nuclear issue was not a political one and that the presidential elections would not change the country’s strategy. On 8 May, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi announced that the Foreign Ministry had started drafting a bill for Iran’s accession to the Additional Protocol. At the same time, Asefi announced that the talks with

the EU had “entered a new stage” and that the two parties could not “return to the past”. Asefi said that Iran would resume “part” of its activities in Esfahan and that it was in the process of deciding which parts. However, he said that the suspension of uranium enrichment would continue. He called on the EU to “review and respond to our proposals in a professional manner and without prejudice and in keeping with the spirit of the Paris agreement”.<sup>92</sup>

Asefi also indicated that the talks in London had failed and that despite the fact that at certain junctures the two sides’ views had been “very close”, the decision to resume part of Iran’s activities had been made after the talks in London.<sup>93</sup> To drive the point home, Asefi announced on 10 May that the Iranian nuclear programme was not a factional issue and that “the majority of Iranians believe that they should use this technology”. Asefi stated that the suspension would continue as long as the talks with the EU. However, he reiterated Iran’s call that “with our proposal they reach an objective guarantee and there is nothing to be concerned about”. Asefi also repeated what Khamene’i had said a few days before regarding the elections: “Some foreigners think that this is a factional or election-related issue. That is not true. It is a national issue and whoever becomes president will not forego the rights of the country.”<sup>94</sup>

At the same time, the daily *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, which usually reflects the views of Ayatollah Khamene’i, argued in an editorial that it was time for Iran to withdraw from the talks with the EU. It sharply criticized the government for putting forward the following proposals: (i) the government’s approval of the Additional Protocol, (ii) the presentation of a bill to the Majlis calling for making only peaceful use of nuclear energy, (iii) presenting the bill on Iran’s accession to the Additional Protocol and formulating “suitable policies and stratagems for its ratification by the Majlis”, (iv) the announcement of a policy regarding the ceiling for the production of “weak enriched uranium”, and (v) accepting a ceiling on the number of centrifuges at Natanz and testing just 3,000 centrifuges.<sup>95</sup>

The *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* editorial argued that since one nuclear power reactor required approximately 60,000 centrifuges, the proposal to impose a ceiling of 3,000 centrifuges at the Natanz power station was tantamount to finding “a respectable way” to close down the Natanz plant.<sup>96</sup> More importantly, the daily lambasted the government for drawing up a bill regarding the imposition of a ban on the production of nuclear weapons, adding that some deputies in the seventh Majlis had proposed a similar bill in 2004. The daily argued that the ratification of such a bill was not among the provisos of the NPT and that it would undermine the independence of the country.<sup>97</sup>

Another *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* editorial on 10 May went so far as to call for the abrogation of Iran’s agreements with the EU. It declared: “America’s decision regarding Iran is still the same as its decision regarding Iraq and Afghanistan ... We are at a very sensitive juncture in Iran’s history. All the Paris, Brussels and Tehran agreements must be annulled ... Resuming uranium enrichment activity and reviving the nuclear fuel cycle are our legitimate rights and they do not contradict the articles of the NPT ... Resume it today.”<sup>98</sup>

The Iranian legislature also supported Khamene’i. The chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Majlis, Ala’eddin Borujerdi, called for the resumption of the enrichment programme, declaring: “We have taken the necessary steps to establish trust and ensure transparency and it is now time to start enrichment within the framework of NPT.”<sup>99</sup>

Borujerdi said that MPs would not ratify the Additional Protocol to the NPT if the Iranian nuclear case continued to be dealt with in a similar fashion.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, Borujerdi supported Khamene'i's position that the presidential elections would not have any impact on Iran's nuclear programme, saying: "Some Americans and Europeans have wrong-headed ideas about Iran. They think that the change of president and members of the cabinet will also change Iranian national interests. In fact, the entire Iranian nation has an inalienable right to possess nuclear technology. All the pillars of the state, and not just the government, are involved in making decisions regarding this issue. It is precisely for this reason that a government ministry did not take on the nuclear case."<sup>101</sup>

Borujerdi said that the Supreme National Security Council represented the entire state apparatus and this meant that the president was not the only decision-maker. Borujerdi declared that American officials' "incorrect analysis" of the situation had led them to argue that the presidential elections would change Iran's nuclear strategy, declaring: "There is no linkage between the Iranian nuclear case and the elections." He said that Iranians would not be influenced by the views expressed by American officials.<sup>102</sup>

In fact, Borujerdi's statement regarding the role of the National Security Council was supported a few days later by its secretary, Hasan Rowhani. Speaking at a meeting with visiting Russian deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Kislyak, Rowhani said that Iran was "not looking for a nuclear bomb", but it would "no longer have any respect" for the NPT if it were prevented from using nuclear energy and the fuel cycle for "peaceful purposes". According to Rowhani, if there were attempts to deprive Iran of its legal rights, "the Iranian people" would "pay any price".<sup>103</sup>

Despite Rowhani's announcement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared that Russia will continue nuclear cooperation with Iran and North Korea.<sup>104</sup> Iranian officials' threats to resume the enrichment process was reflected in Iranian media coverage as well. From early May onwards, Iranian TV began to broadcast an advertisement entitled "towards tomorrow" which showed uranium enrichment at the Natanz power station. The advertisement described how UF<sub>6</sub> gas is fed into the centrifuge and explained the separation of the 235 isotope from 238 isotope. The advertisement also used graphics to demonstrate the chemical reaction inside the centrifuge.<sup>105</sup>

## **The Majlis & the Resumption of Enrichment**

On 15 May 2005, the Iranian Majlis passed a bill obliging the government to continue the enrichment programme.<sup>106</sup> The bill was passed by a large majority. Some MPs saw the bill as a useful instrument for putting pressure on the EU at the nuclear talks. For example, a member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Majlis, Javad Jahangirzadeh, argued that the Iranians no longer trusted the Europeans because of their attempts to "sabotage" the talks. He expressed the hope that "the Europeans will come to their senses".<sup>107</sup>

Jahangirzadeh said that the Iranians were "concerned" and "annoyed" because Iran had been a member of the NPT for "decades" and during that period it had "remained committed to all the rules of the treaty". In fact, he pointed out, the Americans and Germans had proposed the construction of nuclear reactors in Iran and the Germans had started building the Bushehr power station. All of that, Jahangirzadeh complained, had been done at a time when the country's population

was half of its current size. He complained that there had been a “180 degree turn” and there was opposition to Iran’s nuclear activities. Jahangirzadeh argued that the Majlis bill could be used “as means of exercising leverage and ensuring that the opposite side would not try to blackmail Iran more than it has already done”.<sup>108</sup>

Iranian state officials’ reactions to the bill showed the divergence of opinion regarding the course of the country’s strategy. At one end of the spectrum were Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani, the head of the Judiciary Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi-Shahrudi and Majlis Speaker Gholamali Haddad-Adel who welcomed the Majlis decision. At the other end of the spectrum was Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, who declared that the government was determined to act on the decision made by the Majlis and that it had no choice but to do so.<sup>109</sup>

The secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Hasan Rowhani, took a position between those of Shamkhani and Shahrudi and Kharrazi. In a lengthy interview with Mehr News Agency, which reflects the views of the conservative Islamic Publicity Organization, Rowhani argued: “It is impossible to negotiate with Europe without starting up part of Iran’s nuclear activities.”<sup>110</sup> Rowhani declared that apart from the EU three, Russia, a number of non-aligned countries, Japan and even UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had asked Iran to postpone the resumption of its nuclear activities in order to reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Rowhani said that the Iranians did not mind delaying for a while, provided that agreement could be reached. He emphasized, however, that if the parties could not reach agreement, then Iran would definitely resume its nuclear agreement. More importantly, Rowhani indicated that as far as he was concerned, the resumption of Iran’s nuclear activities was being used as a means of improving Iran’s negotiating position. He said that Iran was in favour of holding talks and that it could go on negotiating for months if necessary. However, he stressed that Iran must resume part of its activities; Iran had continued to negotiate because it wanted to reassure “its friends” and “the people”.<sup>111</sup>

Like Kharrazi, Rowhani also said that the government had no choice but to implement the decision made by the Majlis. However, he also said that the Guardian Council had to ratify the Majlis’s decision and that the decision had to be conveyed to the government as a set of instructions.<sup>112</sup> Asked to comment on some deputies’ statements that the country had to resume its nuclear activities prior to the presidential elections, Rowhani said that he was not aware of any time-frame regarding the issue. However, he reiterated that the country would resume part of its nuclear activities.

More importantly, on the issue of the resumption of the production of UCF in Esfahan, Rowhani said that instructions had been issued to the facility to prepare itself for the resumption of its activities, so that it could do so immediately upon being informed of Iranian officials’ decision. “Whatever was necessary” was being done to ensure that the Esfahan facility could do so. Significantly, when asked about the presidential elections and their impact on the country’s nuclear policy, Rowhani said that the larger the turn-out, the better would Iranian officials be able to defend Iran’s position at the talks and tell their counterparts that the elections had “guaranteed our national security”.<sup>113</sup>

The deputy head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization, Mohammad Sa’idi, reinforced Rowhani’s message by arguing that the Esfahan facility was fully prepared to resume its operations whenever necessary. He sought to justify the decision to resume nuclear activities in Esfahan in terms of ensuring that Iran



maintained its cadres of nuclear scientists, arguing that during the 18 months that suspension of Iran's nuclear activities had been in force Iran missed out on the opportunity to ensure its advancement in the field of nuclear energy. He said that if the suspension continued it would "seriously harm the capability of cadres of experts". Sa'idi said that the resumption of activities at the facility had been delayed for one week at the EU's request. However, he made it clear that the facility would resume its operations after the talks with the EU.<sup>114</sup>

Sa'idi also praised the Majlis's decision to pass the bill on the continuation of enrichment, arguing that the Majlis had been "far-sighted" because it had called for the generation of 20,000 megawatts of nuclear electricity over the next 20 years. He also predicted that the number of companies involved in manufacturing components for the country's nuclear programme would double. He said that the country had two choices: it either had to rely on other countries for its nuclear programme, particularly for the construction of power stations, or it had to go it alone. He said that Iran would welcome the involvement of other countries in the construction of power stations. However, he made it clear that the country would go it alone if necessary, even though that option would take longer to implement.<sup>115</sup> The discussion of Iranian negotiations with Russia and the NPT review conference are beyond the scope of this paper and, hopefully, their implications for Iranian policy and strategy will be addressed in a separate study in the post-election period. The debate about the resumption of enrichment was taking place against the background of a realignment in Iranian domestic politics which could have wide-ranging implications for Iranian foreign policy and nuclear strategy.

## **Factional Realignment in Iranian Politics?**

Some prominent Iranian reformist journalists such as Mohammad Quchani, who is a very well informed observer, have argued that a realignment of factions is under way in Iran. The gist of Quchani's argument was that Rafsanjani's candidacy in the presidential elections had led other candidates to measure their success or failure in relation to their position vis-à-vis Rafsanjani. He argued that the centre-right, led by Rafsanjani, and some elements of the old left, particularly from the Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization, would put aside their differences and concentrate on preventing the rise of parvenus such as Qalibaf, who were referred to as "new radicals". Not surprisingly, Qalibaf's supporters were critical of this line of argument.<sup>116</sup> Quchani also suggested that the second generation of Islamic Revolution Guards Corps commanders intended to protect the state apparatus by taking it over from within. He argued:

Perhaps the time has come for soldiers to become bureaucrats. So generals earn doctorates, take off their uniforms and run for president. From the point of view of some commanders, the new IRGC [Islamic Revolution Guards Corps] is returning to its previous three-sided form; to preserve the system, to revitalize and promote Islamism as an ideology, and to defend Islam and the system against partisan politicians and professional intellectuals. With such a position, the role of the IRGC goes beyond that of a party. It must take on the role of a watchful mother that is now giving birth to a new generation of directors and administrators.<sup>117</sup>

However, the realignment is rather complex given the cross-cutting cleavages in the Iranian polity. Moreover, the fact that Ayatollah Khamene'i had to personally intervene to ensure Mo'in's candidacy demonstrates that the Islamic Participation

Party and the Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization are still forces to be reckoned with.

The right of centre daily Hamshahri, which is close to Rafsanjani's Executives of Construction Party, speculated that Qalibaf would withdraw from the elections in favour of Larijani or Ahmadinezhad.<sup>118</sup> However, such notions were dispelled when Qalibaf criticized the Guardian Council for disqualifying Mo'in and approving of Ahmadinezhad's candidacy. Qalibaf went so far as to accuse the Guardian Council of pursuing its own factional interests and of trying to ensure the victory of its own favourite candidate.<sup>119</sup> To be sure, Qalibaf did not exactly consider Mo'in to be his political ally, but he was competing for the same votes as Reza'i and Ahmadinezhad. Thus Ahmadinezhad posed a greater threat to Qalibaf than did Mo'in.

The realignment in politics is also likely to have a major impact on Iranian nuclear and regional strategies, as well as on Iranian policy towards the US. Rafsanjani and his allies, Hasan Rowhani and Abbas Musavian, sought to use the talks with the US to reach a modus vivendi with the US. To be sure, as a result of the massive pressure exerted on Rowhani by the Guards and military figures, not to mention conservative political groupings, Rowhani had progressively moved closer to the radical and conservative end of the political spectrum. However, both Rowhani and Rafsanjani were still more likely to engage in talks with the US. Rafsanjani and his allies, most prominently Hasan Rowhani, seem to believe that cooperation with the US on important regional issues such as Iraq and Afghanistan and commercial relations with the US are likely to reduce US geopolitical, military and economic pressure on Iran and make it easier for Iran to pursue the nuclear option without actually weaponizing the Iranian programme. In a long interview with The New York Times, Rafsanjani was asked about both issues and whether the nuclear talks would also prepare the ground for improving relations between the two countries. The web sites Aftab News Agency and Hatef, which reflect Rafsanjani's viewpoint, published the interview.

On the issues of Iraq and Afghanistan, Rafsanjani said that the US was "satisfied with what Iran had done" to ensure the "normalization of the situation" in the two countries. He also said that the US and Iran had been "talking to one another indirectly" about the nuclear, Iraqi and Afghan issues.<sup>120</sup> On the issue of Iran's nuclearization, however, Rafsanjani denied that Iran was interested either in weaponization or even a bomb in the basement programme. He declared that Iran wanted to use nuclear energy for non-military purposes because it had many applications in such fields as health care, agriculture and industry. He said that the US had first used nuclear weapons in Japan, adding that Islam did not permit people to annihilate innocent human beings. He also complained that President Bush wanted another 100 nuclear reactors. He contended that if Iran's population is one-fifth of the population of America, then it should build another 20 reactors in addition to those it had already built. He criticized the US for denying Iran the same rights as the US.

On the issue of relations with the US, Rafsanjani said that since the US had started the animosities, it had to take the first step. Rafsanjani also rejected charges that Iran was not a democratic country, claiming that "tensions" existed in other countries such as the UK and the US. However, he did stumble when asked why Iranians were more pro-American than Arabs. He argued that the issues of Palestine and Iraq had undermined US relations with the Arab world; many Iranians opposed American "hegemony" and that the only reason some people wanted better relations was because of the performance of American industry.<sup>121</sup>

## Different Approaches to the Pursuit of the Break-Out Option

The factional realignment in Iranian politics undoubtedly had major impact on Iran's negotiating strategy in May. As we will see, in April, former Iranian envoy to the IAEA, Ali Akbar Salehi, predicted that it was likely that there would be a breakthrough in the talks before the Iranian presidential elections.<sup>122</sup> However, Qalibaf's emergence as a major contender in the presidential elections and Khamene'i's refusal to stop former "military officials" from interfering in politics compelled Rafsanjani and his close ally Hasan Rowhani to increasingly rely upon supporters of President Khatami to consolidate their domestic position. This led to a partial realignment of Iranian politics as elements of "the old left" and "the centre-right" tacitly formed an alliance against Qalibaf and Reza'i. This alliance, in turn, led Reza'i, Qalibaf and the mayor of Tehran Ahmadinezhad to compete for the same bloc of votes, namely, young religious voters, in an effort to undermine Rafsanjani's position. By the time EU-Iran talks were held in late May, there was stalemate in Iranian politics. Prior to the talks, the Iranians warned that the talks might well break down and sought to lower the expectations of their interlocutors. The EU troika, Great Britain, France and Germany, also discussed amongst themselves the issue of providing economic incentives to Iran in return for Iran's abandonment of its enrichment programme. At the same time, the threat of the referral of Iran's case to the UN Security Council concerned Iranian officials. However, the Iranians insisted that they would not cease their enrichment programme. In fact, the spokesman for Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Aqamohammadi declared that unless there was progress at expert-level talks, high-level negotiations would not be held in Geneva. He said that he expected the Europeans to offer "new ideas" to break the deadlock. Asked how long Iran would suspend its nuclear activities, he declared: "We believe that the start and not the suspension of the activities is a matter of concern."<sup>123</sup>

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi was even blunter. He declared that the EU-Iran talks could have "a bad ending" "if the Europeans fail to state their case clearly". He said that the US had always exerted pressure on the parties to the talks to influence the course of the talks and he expressed the hope that the Europeans would "act independently".<sup>124</sup> An Iranian radio commentary called on the Europeans to offer Iran "objective guarantees" to help it "obtain peaceful nuclear energy" and ensure that the talks will not reach an impasse.<sup>125</sup> At the same time, the foreign minister of Luxembourg, Jean Asselborn, whose country held the EU's rotating presidency, warned that "everything will be done to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon".<sup>126</sup> Asselborn declared:

This is very, very clear. As the chairman of the [EU's General Affairs and External Relations] Council, I had a mandate to tell the public that if the Iranians resume the enrichment of uranium, there will be a conflict with what was decided in November in Paris. It is obvious that this will have consequences. And one of the consequences could be that really any negotiations on cooperation, on political dialogue will be stopped. So the International [Atomic] Energy Agency in Vienna will take the appropriate decision to submit the issue to the Security Council if appropriate. Today is a very important day, and I think that even in the current period of elections in Iran, they will have understood. Everything needs to be done to avoid having another country which has a nuclear bomb in this very precarious region of the world. People also need to know what will happen at the Security Council and what could be, let's say, the scale of sanctions.<sup>127</sup>

Indeed it was later reported that the Europeans had started drawing up contingency plans for referring the Iranian case to the UN Security Council. A European diplomat close to the talks told AFP: "Our position was perfectly clear: the suspension and negotiations should continue. There is no question of a compromise from our side." According to the diplomat, "the Iranians were aware of this".<sup>128</sup> By the time the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Hasan Rowhani arrived in Geneva for talks with the EU troika's foreign ministers, official Iranian media coverage indicated that even the continuation of high-level talks was an achievement in itself.<sup>129</sup>

Indeed the outcome of the Geneva talks indicated that it was extremely difficult for the Iranians to agree to anything prior to the presidential elections. The EU three and Iran decided that Iran would remain committed to the terms of the 2004 Paris agreement "at least until the end of July".<sup>130</sup> At the same time, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said that, at the end of July, the Europeans would give Iran "detailed proposals" to resolve the nuclear issue.<sup>131</sup>

Moreover, Iran was rewarded almost immediately for its decision not to resume enrichment and it was allowed to begin talks aimed at WTO membership. An Iranian official, Ambassador Mohammad Reza Alborzi said that the decision "has long been overdue".<sup>132</sup> Despite the difficult negotiations with the EU troika, the pursuit of a nuclear break-out option within a multilateral framework remained one of the major components of Iranian strategy. The predominant tendency in Iranian strategy was the pursuit of "confidence-building" measures with the EU as a means of dragging out the talks and preparing the ground for the resumption of the uranium enrichment programme. Indeed, one conservative columnist, Amir Mohebbian, said after the Geneva talks that Iran's main aim was to "build trust so that it can continue its enrichment programme for peaceful purposes".<sup>133</sup> There are two variations on this theme as far as Iranian strategists are concerned: (i) pursuit of a break-out option through harnessing the EU's strategy of détente with Iran and the EU and (ii) pursuit of a break-out option through establishing Iran as a regional power and relying upon regional mechanisms to check US power in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. To be sure there are nuances in both lines of thought and the two are not mutually exclusive. The gist of the break-out option through harnessing the EU's strategy was predicated on the assumption that the EU and the US were global geopolitical rivals and that the EU had an interest in ensuring that the US would not control the oil resources of the Middle East. Proponents of this line of thinking believed that Iran had to make its case by arguing that it was operating within the EU's "sphere of influence". The most lucid argument in support of this approach has been put forward by former Iranian envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Akbar Salehi. Salehi sharply criticized Iranian negotiators for their failure to gather political intelligence on Iran's interlocutors, arguing that EU negotiators had much better political intelligence on Iran. Salehi argued that "Westerners" preferred the nuclear issue to be resolved before the end of Khatami's second term because they preferred to "make concessions to the reformists".<sup>134</sup>

Salehi argued that the EU wanted to be "an effective player" in the international arena and that, for that reason, it could not allow the US to undermine the nuclear talks with Iran. Salehi contended that in the event of a confrontation between the US and Iran, the consequences would be unknown and that the EU did not want this happen because "the entire Middle East would be destabilized". Salehi said that Turkey was a potential member of the EU and that the EU did not want Turkey's neighbour, Iran, to be unstable because the spill-over effects of such a

regional turmoil would affect Europe as well. Moreover, Salehi contended, Europe would have a powerful neighbour, namely America, which “would exert leverage to contain Europe” by using its control over oil resources and using other instruments of power at its disposal.<sup>135</sup> Salehi believed that failure to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue would complicate efforts to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction and undermine “the cohesion” of the NPT. Then, according to Salehi, “nobody” would believe in the NPT any longer.<sup>136</sup>

Salehi argued that “Westerners” wanted Iran to stop its nuclear programme and remain an oil exporter. He argued that the Iranian nuclear crisis had been brought about only because of Iran’s policies rather than because of its technical capabilities. He cited the South and North Korean nuclear programmes as examples of American double standards. Salehi did not downplay the importance of military power in international relations. However, his analysis of Iranian policy towards America relied upon two factors, the international community’s resistance against the US and other potential proliferants’ support for the Iranian position. At the same time, Salehi was hopeful that countries such as Brazil and South Africa would side with Iran because if the US dealt with Iran through the use of force, they would be the next ones to be dealt with.<sup>137</sup>

The other line of thought, pursuit of the break-out option through multilateral regional diplomacy, also had adherents in Iran. However, this strategy also has its nuances and its proponents tend to place emphasis on different aspects of it. This strategy was best elaborated by Mohsen Reza’i, during an interview held to explain his presidential election programme. As we have already seen one of Iran’s chief negotiators, Sirus Naseri, linked the nuclear issue to regional conflicts, arguing that exerting pressure on Iran would lead to regional instability in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon. Shortly after the Majlis passed the bill which made it compulsory for the government to pursue nuclear enrichment, Iranian Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani declared that Iran had “suitable nuclear defence capabilities”. Asked whether the production of uranium hexafluoride was not tantamount to engaging in enrichment, Shamkhani argued that its production was the preparatory stage and “statesmen must implement” that decision.

Moreover, when asked about Iranian capabilities to defend its nuclear installations in the event of an attack, Shamkhani said: “Nuclear defence does not mean attacking a nuclear installation. In fact, it can reduce the vulnerability of a peaceful installation which might be attacked. If the operations of a nuclear reactor are problematic, then one can take preventative measures to ensure that this will not happen.”<sup>138</sup>

As the author pointed out in an earlier CSRC paper,<sup>139</sup> the pressure from conservative groups such as the Islamic Coalition Society, which by and large supported Ali Larijani’s presidential candidacy, as well as from former and current Guards officials led Hasan Rowhani to move towards the conservatives on fundamental issues of nuclear strategy.

Mohsen Reza’i, who had earlier criticized Rowhani for undermining Iran’s “deterrent” capability, argued that there was no evidence that the US wanted to build a better relationship with Iran. He declared: “The Americans have not put forward any serious proposals regarding the holding of talks with Iran.”<sup>140</sup> Significantly, Reza’i contended that if he were in charge of the Iranian negotiating team, he would give the EU “another chance. If we do reach agreements with them and those agreements are not implemented, then I would start the enrichment

process within the limits set by the NPT, but I would do so without leaving the Additional Protocol or the NPT.”<sup>141</sup> At the same time, he repeated his criticism of the Iranian negotiating team, contending: “We gave them secret intelligence on our country which was worth billions [does not specify currency]. That was not an insignificant matter. If we are not able to gain any concessions from others, how can we possibly cooperate with the rest of the world? This showed the impotence of our foreign policy and the fact that it has reached a standstill.”<sup>142</sup>

Reza’i declared that if he were elected president, he would ask the International Atomic Energy Agency to place its cameras in Iranian installations. He argued: “The decision to start the enrichment process will send them a signal that we are not prepared to cooperate no matter what the price is. However, in order to preserve our national interests we are prepared to forget about nuclear weapons and many other things and we will cooperate with them. I think this sort of behaviour will give them the necessary response.”<sup>143</sup>

During an interview to explain his election manifesto, Reza’i elucidated his perception of the regional challenges facing Iran and elaborated his views on the asymmetric strategy. Reza’i declared: “I believe that the most important regional challenge facing Iran is the greater Middle East initiative. In other words, I mean the American military presence in the region. The Americans are in the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. I mean they have occupied the area around Iran. They have not done so to encircle us. I do not agree with that interpretation.” Reza’i then went on to delineate his strategy for gaining concessions from Washington, arguing: “If Iran stops its regional cooperation even to the slightest degree, the entire region will be engulfed in chaos. The Americans will not be able to stay in Iraq or Afghanistan even for one day. The reason that this region is stable is that Iran is doing its utmost to cooperate. The only thing that I am saying is; why is it that Iran cannot get what it deserves to get out of such cooperation?”<sup>144</sup>

Reza’i argued that Iran faced a certain degree of “insecurity” in its international relations and that instability in Iraq and Israel’s nuclear arsenal were threats to Iran’s interests. He contended that the expansion of Iran’s influence would enable it to confront the US from a position of strength. He believed that once the US military presence was removed from the region even Israel’s nuclear arsenal would not be a threat to Iran.<sup>145</sup> However, Reza’i believed that the US and Israel had such close relations that one could not separate the two. At the same time, Reza’i was prepared to consider the resumption of contacts in principle if the right offer were made. He declared:

Israel and America are so close to each other that America cannot remove that thing from itself. It’s life depends on it. Therefore, in fact, the Americans have come here to stay. Well, Iran’s role is the most important one amidst all this. I mean, Iran is right next to America’s lifeline. While it is being threatened, it can also take maximum advantage of its situation. But how is it going to do that? Our problem with the Americans is that, firstly, the Americans are afraid to establish relations with us. I do not accept that from morning till night the Americans are waiting for Iran to say yes. That is not the point at issue. I think that if America had a strong president who could put forward a proposal to Iran which was worthy of the Iranian nation, then many things would change.<sup>146</sup>

Reza'i's solution to Iran's geostrategic problems was the resumption of the nuclear programme, which he clearly linked to improving Iran's bargaining power vis-à-vis the US. He argued:

However, I will change our diplomacy completely. I mean, we will resume the enrichment programme. We will also bring the Esfahan and Arak factories into it as well. However, we will do so under the supervision of the UN and the [International Atomic Energy] Agency. It will be done properly and within the framework of the NPT and international laws. This takes guts. In my view, this will be done. I promise to you and to the Iranian nation that within six months of implementing this policy, you will see that we will be able to resolve many issues with Europe, America and others.<sup>147</sup>

The web site Baztab, which usually reflects Reza'i's views, carried an article by Dr Seyyed Salman Safavi which delineated the main policy currents in the Iranian state apparatus. According to Safavi, the era of "dialogue of civilizations" initiated by President Mohammad Khatami was over because the US had been pursuing an offensive strategy towards Iran since 2003. He argued that contrary to "some Westerners'" perception that the president of Iran did not have much power, he was actually enormously powerful because of his control over the executive branch, the public treasury and the Supreme National Security Council. He said that since the president presided over the Supreme National Security Council and since the latter defined Iran's nuclear policy, the president was in a position to formulate Iranian nuclear policy.<sup>148</sup>

According to Safavi, there were three main policy currents in the Iranian state on the nuclear issue: (a) "Realistic" officials believed that Iran had to transform its foreign policy and shift the emphasis from security and ideological issues to cultural and economic ones. They believe that Iranian conservatives, as well as American and Israeli conservatives, had started the current brouhaha over the Iranian nuclear programme to further their own interests. Iran is not a nuclear power and it should not become one; (b) The realists, who comprised "pragmatists" and "technocrats" in the executive branch, believed that Iran's diplomacy of détente was basically a good thing, but Iran had to get results for its efforts. Iran had to obtain major concessions from the EU and the US, most notably a security guarantee and acceptance of its role as the predominant regional power. If such concessions were obtained then there would be no problems with accepting suspending or ceasing the enrichment of uranium; (c) the third group were "the idealists" who believed that the US or other countries did not have the right to dictate to Iran or interfere with its rights as a member of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. They believed that such behaviour would make "bullying" the norm in international relations and undermine the sovereignty of countries such as Iran.<sup>149</sup>

Safavi argued that if the Europeans tried to "kill time", Iran should resume the enrichment programme and if Western pressure on Iran increased, Iran should withdraw from the Additional Protocol to the NPT, while seeking to increase its defence capability and economic power. He said that Iranian nuclear policy would "undoubtedly" change after the presidential elections.<sup>150</sup>

In its commentaries, Baztab supported Reza'i's policy of adopting a hard-headed realist approach to Washington. For example, an article by Seyyed Zia'eddin Ehtesham argued that the US had bypassed the EU and given Iran "a political

wink” without the EU’s intermediation. According to Ehtesham, the Bush administration signalled that it was prepared to improve relations with Iran and that it had already made two concessions to Iran. Firstly, the US had refrained from vetoing Iran’s WTO membership. Secondly, President Bush announced that the US would oppose Iran’s production of “high percentages” of enriched uranium.<sup>151</sup>

Reza’i was not the only presidential candidate who favoured the pursuit of unilateral objectives within a multilateral framework. Ali Larijani also argued that Iran had to develop its ties with regional organizations in an effort to undermine US power in the Middle East. Larijani called for the expansion of Iran’s relations with regional groupings such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). He argued that the GCC was changing its attitude towards Iran and that Iran was in a position to take advantage of this change of attitude because it was “creating security” in the region. Larijani wanted Iran to pursue an “active diplomacy” to change the make-up of regional groupings.<sup>152</sup> Unlike Reza’i, however, Larijani believed that the US, including “the neo-conservatives” wanted to have better relations with Iran. Larijani drew a sharp distinction between US officials’ rhetoric and US foreign policy. The centrepiece of Larijani’s foreign policy initiative was to take advantage of the failure of America’s “unilateralist policies” to improve Iran’s regional position. He argued that while America was fighting in Iraq, India and China had improved their economic position in the Middle East. Larijani believed that Russia was no longer a major player in the Middle East and that Egypt and Turkey had failed to fulfil their regional potentials. He argued that only Iran and China were capable of leading the Middle East.<sup>153</sup>

## **Will the Presidential Elections Change Iranian Strategy?**

The Guardian Council’s decision to reject the candidacy of Mostafa Mo’in, the main representative of the new reformist current in the Khatami camp, was a strong indication that some conservative figures were determined to return the Iranian political system to the pre-Khatami era. Four of the six candidates whose eligibility was initially approved by the vetting body, the Guardian Council, had served in the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps: Mohsen Reza’i, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, Ali Larijani and Mahmud Ahmadinezhad. Moreover, Ahmadinezhad has very close ties to Iran’s largest vigilante organization, Ansar-e Hezbollah. None of the other candidates is likely to pursue the reform programme with the same zeal as Khatami even if they are elected.

After the Guardian Council announced the eligibility of these candidates, President Khatami’s brother, Mohammad Reza Khatami, declared that the Guardian Council’s rejection of Mo’in showed that it feared a Mo’in victory. Khatami declared: “Mostafa Mo’in is our red line. If he does not stand in the elections, we will boycott the elections.”<sup>154</sup>

All the candidates, particularly Reza’i and Larijani, will be committed to pursuing the Iranian nuclear programme. As we saw earlier, Iranian nuclear strategy is not a by-product of factionalism in Iranian polity. More importantly, all candidates recognize that Iran will face severe economic challenges in the future. For example, Larijani argued that economic corruption had severely undermined public confidence in Iranian officials and that some people had been “disgracing everyone”. He declared that 70 per cent of Iranians did not believe in the “anti-corruption campaign”.<sup>155</sup> Larijani also recognized that unemployment would be a major



problem for any Iranian government, arguing that Iran had to create 800,000 jobs per year and that the government had only been creating 450,000 jobs per year.<sup>156</sup> Mohsen Reza'i also saw economic corruption as major problem for Iran in the future. In an election campaign teaser, he declared: "Some people are worried about my candidacy. If these people are linked to thieves, looters, rentiers and those who abuse the public treasury, then they should be worried. I will cut off their hands from the public purse."<sup>157</sup>

Reza'i claimed that he wanted to establish "the government of love, the government of power, an efficient government". Moreover, he declared: "The power structure must be changed, otherwise the status quo continues".<sup>158</sup> Reza'i claimed that the Iranian establishment was trying to "disgrace" him and that during the Iran-Iraq war he had fought against the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, which he said was supported by both the US and the Soviet Union, as well as Iranian factions.<sup>159</sup> Reza'i said that he would not withdraw from the race under any circumstances, declaring: "I will only go with a bullet or if people don't want me."<sup>160</sup> Subsequently, Reza'i criticized the state radio and television for their "selective approach" to broadcasting his campaign messages. His campaign headquarters made a formal complaint about the state media's coverage of his campaign, threatening that if they did not change their approach, Reza'i would prevent them from broadcasting his campaign films.<sup>161</sup> However, apparently Reza'i's lack of popularity forced him to come to the conclusion that the people did not want him. According to an opinion poll commissioned by Fars News Agency, Reza'i was lagging behind other candidates and he had only 2.23 per cent support in the country.<sup>162</sup> On 15 June, Reza'i announced his withdrawal from the presidential race. He was quoted as saying that he decided to do so to "consolidate the people's votes" and to make them more "effective".<sup>163</sup>

However, Reza'i's lack of popularity should not lead one to think that advocates of the break-out option will not be in senior positions. Advocates of the bomb in the basement strategy are also present in conservative political groupings. Indeed one could argue that Reza'i had moved closer to a variant of this position. Before the nuclear debate reached its denouement, neither Hasan Rowhani nor Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani were considered to be reformists. Indeed, the evidence indicates that Rowhani and Rafsanjani's decision to move closer to the reformists was the result of their disputes with the Islamic Coalition Society and senior Guards Corps commanders over the choice of strategy.

By early May some reformists were openly supporting Rafsanjani. At the same time, some conservative media outlets were warning Rafsanjani that even if he were elected, he would face problems just like Khatami did during his two terms as president.<sup>164</sup> One prominent opponent of the reform programme, Abbas Salimi-Namin, who was the campaign manager of Ahmad Tavakkoli, Rafsanjani's rival in two presidential elections, lambasted Rafsanjani for his "lack of correct understanding of executive responsibilities". Salimi-Namin said that "the fundamentalist current" had supported Rafsanjani in the past, but that they had completely changed their views. He also criticized those who said that the country faced internal and external crises and that it needed "a saviour".<sup>165</sup>

Some reformists still argued that increasing the turn-out in the presidential elections was the best means of broadening the base of the regime and preventing the EU and the US from exerting pressure on Iran.<sup>166</sup> Senior Western diplomats in Tehran denied that they favoured Rafsanjani, arguing that even if he won the elections, there would be no guarantee that he would negotiate a long-term nuclear agreement that would satisfy all sides.<sup>167</sup> The nuclear debate also sharpened

differences within the Iranian polity regarding the relationship between the state and the military. "Reformists" such as Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour and Asgharzadeh lambasted Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf during the election campaign, accusing him of trying to impose military rule on the country and selling his country to "foreigners". Rafsanjani, who was the *bête noire* of the reformists in the 2000 Majlis elections, tried to define a new role for himself as a major opponent of militarization. At the same time, many reformists saw Rafsanjani as the best deterrent against the military because of his conservative credentials. Rafsanjani had not been exactly renowned as a champion of democracy or human rights in Iran. His opposition to militarization indicated that the military had gone beyond what was acceptable in Iranian politics.

However, it is important to make a number of points about the role of the military. Firstly, the centre of gravity of Iranian politics has shifted significantly in the direction of the conservatives and radicals in the last two years. The supreme leader Ayatollah Khamene'i, who is the main advocate of the unilateralist strategy of balancing the US, does not need a military coup or a military leader to implement his strategy. Military commanders such as Shamkhani, Reza'i and Qalibaf have already shifted the political centre of gravity in that direction. Secondly, it would be dangerous for the current leadership to encourage the militarization of Iranian politics in the long run. Younger members of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps consider themselves to be professional soldiers and in that respect, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps is becoming increasingly like professional military establishments elsewhere.

While the current leadership, C-in-C of the Corps Rahim-Safavi and his deputy Zolqadr, act and talk like revolutionaries, the rank and file have been increasingly identifying themselves with the goals of the reformist movement. The best indication of this tendency can be observed in the reactions to the statements made by former Guards officials such as Akbar Ganji. In 2003, Akbar Ganji published the Republican Manifesto, arguing that it was not possible to reform the regime. He was not executed and the rank and file did not launch a campaign of vilification against him. A similar tendency could be observed among the rank and file during the Hashem Aqajari case. Aqajari was initially sentenced to death and accused of "insulting the Prophet" when he said that imitating sources of religious emulation made human beings rather like monkeys. Despite the public outcry led by the conservatives and the calls for Aqajari's execution, Ayatollah Khamene'i had to intervene to save Aqajari. Had conservative leaders been sure of support among the rank and file for such a course of action, they would certainly have dealt with Aqajari differently.

Both Qalibaf and Reza'i seem to have identified their potential supporters as young religious people who oppose Westernization, but who want to improve their lot at the same time. Reza'i has repeatedly criticized the concept of clash of civilizations, but he has not done much in terms of proposing an alternative framework for understanding the international system. What is clear from Reza'i's speeches and his writings is that he is committed to establishing Iran as a regional power and he believes that the Iranian nuclear programme is a step in that direction. He also fears an American attack on Iran and he has been critical of Rowhani for "undermining Iran's deterrent capability".<sup>168</sup>

Iranian officials, including officials of the current Khatami government, have repeatedly declared that they will only engage in talks with the US on the basis of "mutual respect". Reza'i has contended that the only way in which Iran can engage

in negotiations with the US is by becoming a regional power: “Concerning America we neither seek war nor accept submission. They want to make us choose between either of the two and no matter which one we choose, we will fail. We should choose a new way and that is imposing a powerful Iran onto the region and the world.”<sup>169</sup>

## **Rifts in Iranian Leadership & the Question of Counter-Proliferation**

It is important to note that the rifts in the Iranian state apparatus over strategy are likely to persist regardless of whether a former military official is elected or not. As we saw earlier, despite his comments on the importance of Iran’s “deterrent” capability, Mohsen Reza’i has talked about developing a nuclear capability while remaining in the NPT. Qalibaf has not talked much about nuclear strategy, but his candidacy has already led to an outcry about the militarization of Iranian polity. Reza’i, Qalibaf and Larijani are all likely to work even harder to push the NPT to its limits in pursuit of Iran’s enrichment programme.

The assumption on which both Iranian strategies, particularly the bomb in the basement strategy, are based is that the EU and the IAEA will ensure that non-proliferation will remain the predominant norm in international security relations. Indeed, both strategies seem to be based on the assumption that the EU and the IAEA can prevent the implementation of a counter-proliferation strategy by the US. Iranian leaders, be they advocates of the unilateralist strategy of balancing the US or supporters of the bomb in the basement option, see US counter-proliferation strategy as the main threat to Iran’s regional ambitions. That is why Iranian Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani has made statements about Iran’s policy of “nuclear defence”. However, in the Iranian lexicon, the concept of nuclear defence is riddled with ambiguity. The deputy C-in-C of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr has said that in the event of an attack against Iran, Iran will attack Israel’s Dimona nuclear reactor. Another Iranian Guards commander, Hasan Abbasi, has talked about blowing up 6,000 nuclear weapons on US territory. Shamkhani’s statements, however, have been more ambiguous. While stressing that Iran’s nuclear capability has contributed to its emergence as a regional power, Shamkhani has said that nuclear defence does not necessarily mean attacking an adversary’s nuclear capabilities.

The only thing that all of these statements have in common is grave concern about US or Israeli counter-proliferation strategy. The key challenge for Iranian strategists, be they military or civilian, is how to counter US and Israeli counter-proliferation strategies. Statements such as those by UN secretary-general Kofi Annan that the Security Council would not necessarily agree to the imposition of sanctions on Iran are likely to strengthen advocates of bomb in the basement. In fact, one such advocate, Ali Akbar Salehi, predicted not that long ago that even in the event of Iran’s case being referred to the Security Council, Iran would not necessarily lose the case.

The premise behind both Iranian strategies seems to be that the US would not be able to ensure the necessary level of support in the Security Council. When Iran entered into talks with the EU it sought to prevent the formation of an international consensus on the Iranian nuclear issue. However, some advocates of the bomb in the basement strategy seem to have broadened their agenda and they now seem to be talking in terms of taking advantage of the nuclear talks to rearrange some

geopolitical relationships in the region to make it politically more difficult for the US and Israel to strike at Iran's nuclear installations. Ali Akbar Salehi has argued that Iran is part of the EU's sphere of influence and that the EU does not have an interest in permitting the US to step on its turf.

Such arguments seem to be based on the assumption that Iran is the only reliable regional partner for the EU. It also fails to take into consideration some EU countries, particularly the UK's, close relationship with some Gulf Cooperation Council states. The arguments that those who subscribe to such views have put forward are rather similar to those which the Shah put forward to justify Iran's close security relationship with the US. However, in the case of Iran's relationship with the EU the purpose of Iranian strategy – and that includes both the bomb in the basement and unilateralist variants - is to harness the EU's policy of dialogue to establish Iran as a regional power. A regime dominated by the military or radicals such as Ahmadinezhad and his Ansar-e Hezbollah supporters, will find it difficult to maintain the same level of political dialogue with the EU.

Khamene'i's intervention in the dispute over Mo'in's candidacy demonstrated that he believes that the Islamic Iran Participation Front and the Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization must be mollified lest they galvanize support for action against him. As the official who is ultimately responsible for defining the parameters of Iranian strategy in general, and what is permissible in particular, Khamene'i undoubtedly realizes that he cannot politically afford to visibly destroy organizations such as the Islamic Iran Participation Front or the Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization as long as Iranian strategy is operating on the basis of harnessing the EU.

Throughout Khatami's presidency there has been talk of radicals and conservatives planning to impose a state of emergency on the country. If the negotiations with the EU come to a standstill or if there is an attack on Iran's nuclear installations, then it is highly probable that there will be a state of emergency. Indeed, statements such as those by Naseri or Shamkhani seem to be aimed at precipitating a crisis aimed at facilitating the imposition of a state of emergency. Presumably, advocates of such a course of action calculate that Iran's asymmetric option will enable it to limit the damage caused by a US or Israeli attack and withdraw from the NPT with Non-Aligned support. However, the fact that advocates of this course of action think that they need an international crisis to sell their strategy to their domestic audience is actually a sign of their weakness. Students of international and strategic history realize that misperceptions and miscalculations have been the cause of many conflicts around the world.

Advocates of the bomb in the basement strategy in Iran seem to believe that Iran's nuclear capability will enable it to deter an American attack. Moreover, they tend to see nuclear power status as the sine qua non of regional power status. There is considerable evidence of factional realignment in Iranian politics. However, the underlying trend is also clear. The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps remains at the centre of Iranian politics. That four of the candidates are former Guards officials speaks volumes about the realities of Iranian politics. Any strategy towards Iran must take account of this political reality. At the same time, one should bear in mind that the current generation of Guards officials have a different outlook on politics. They also have different experiences from those of the Guards leadership or the former officials involved in the elections. Thus any president, regardless of his political tendencies, will have to grapple with the problem of managing the

evolution of the Guards. The debate about civil-military relations in Iran has just begun, but it will have an important impact on the politics of the region.

Sirus Naseri's threat to link the nuclear issue to regional conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon was not an isolated incident. Iranian officials, be they reformist, conservative or radical, see a clear link between different components of national power. Asymmetric warfare has always been a key element of revolutionary Iran's regional strategy. However, asymmetric warfare is viewed as a technique. The main difference of opinion among Iranian officials is over the choice of grand strategy and the policies which are best suited to the pursuit of their grand strategy. Indeed, since the Iran-Iraq war, the regime has emphasized the development of Iran's nuclear and asymmetric capabilities.

Naseri's decision to link the nuclear issue to regional conflicts was only natural, considering the course of Iranian regional strategy since 1989. The recent debate about the militarization of Iranian polity is important in the sense that it has brought the underlying trend to the surface. At the same time, the conflict among Qalibaf, Larijani and Ahmadinezhad has demonstrated that the Iranian military establishment is by no means a monolith. The key question for the current leadership of the Guards Corps is whether the new generation of recruits will buy into Qalibaf or Reza'i's politics and contribute to the development of a new generation of young militants who are knowledgeable about the latest developments in information technology without losing their ideological commitment. The challenge for those who wish to transform Iranian polity and broaden the base of the Iranian regime without bringing down the state apparatus in the process is to cultivate the Guards and to capitalize on the differences between the leadership of the Guards and the rank and file. However, it is important to emphasize that even those who wish to transform the polity will probably want to pursue the so-called bomb in the basement strategy. All the factions involved in the power struggle believe that Iran must be and deserves to be a regional power. Whatever the result of the presidential elections in June 2005, the outcome will have a major impact on Middle Eastern politics for years to come.

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