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Inside Iran: Prospects for Change in the Islamic Republic's Nuclear Policy?

Roundtable Summary of Heinrich Böll Foundation-INSS joint event on March 5, 2012

This roundtable discussion focused on the impact of international pressure (including sanctions, sabotage, explosions, etc.) on Iran's nuclear policy and the stability of the regime. Current developments within Iran were reviewed, and the possible effects of these developments on the P5+1 negotiations with Iran were discussed. Finally, current attitudes of the US and Europe as well as their potential and desired policies were discussed.

The recent parliamentary elections (early March 2012) served as the starting point for analyzing developments in Iran. Khamenei affirmed his power and is now running "a one man show." Following those elections, Iran has become more centralized: Khamenei has marginalized Ahmadinejad as well as centrist revolutionary figures. This is part of a larger power struggle between the Revolutionary Guards factions that support Ahmadinejad and those that support Khamenei.

Moreover, Khamenei is revising the role of the parliament. During the elections, only factions fully in support of Khamenei were allowed to run. Some speculate that Khamenei will choose a less dynamic figure to be the next speaker of parliament, as the current speaker is too dominant. Lastly, Khamenei might dissolve the presidency, in order to do away with two competing centers of power. On top of the above mentioned institutional changes, some claimed that since 2009 the Iranian population became more passive and less interested in politics.

Some suggested that Khamenei is losing track of what happens inside Iran. He surrounds himself with a small group (about 20) of members of the Revolutionary Guards, who serve as the top echelon of Iran's decision makers and have little understanding of foreign affairs. Moreover, Khamenei doesn't let the opposition have its voice heard. This situation not only engenders poor decision making, which was criticized and described as careless and not fitting any logical pattern, but it also undermines the stability of the regime.

The issue of regime stability served as one of the main points of contention within the roundtable. Some view the regime as unstable due to the above mentioned institutional changes and the effects of international pressure (elaborated on further below).

On the other hand, it was argued that Khamenei can survive criticism. The absence of major unrest in Iran has a few explanations. First, the regime enjoys huge support from a committed

minority, mainly the elite that is united to preserve the system. Second, economic policies are being supported, though it is not clear by whom and for how long. Third, the oppression is much more sophisticated than in other countries in the Middle East: the regime knows quite well how to manipulate and stamp out the opposition. Fourth, the population is nationalistic and fears the unknown. They may oppose the regime, but they are even more afraid of a possible revolution. In addition, the regime has become reconciled to young people living more freely (hosting parties, listening to Western music, traveling abroad) as long as they do not become involved in politics.

In this regard, the situation in Iran was compared to the upheavals in Arab world, namely, should we expect an "Iranian Spring"? Most speakers thought that a comparison between Iran and Egypt is unwarranted. The conditions prevailing in Egypt – including the population's will to test the allegiance of the military and civil society development (through NGOs) that brought young revolutionaries to the streets – are nonexistent in Iran. Moreover, the Iranian opposition is outside the country and thus has relatively little effect on the inside. Lastly, in Egypt, the military supported Egypt rather than Mubarak personally. In Iran, the Revolutionary Guards support the leader. Though the sanctions are having an effect, they have yet to make the population turn against the regime en masse.

However, this opinion was not shared by all. Some claimed that in Egypt the military made deals (removing Mubarak) to protect the economy. Thus, if Iranian economic interests are threatened, it may turn elements in the Revolutionary Guards against Khamenei.

This review of the internal situation served as the backdrop for assessing possible future developments, as well as analyzing the views and policies of the international community. Can the sanctions topple the regime and/or change its nuclear policy? Of course, the basic premise is that the more the regime feels threatened as a result of international pressure, the more likely it is to change its policy.

Most speakers opposed direct efforts aimed at regime change (as opposed to a welcome side effect of pressure to change Iran's nuclear policy). However, the degree of objection was not uniform. Some argued that both Israel and the US have failed before trying to change regimes. Others more mildly suggested focusing on *policy* change rather than *regime* change, while keeping regime change in mind (also as a means of pressure).

The supporters of regime change offered an outreach program: talking directly to the population, combining a message of human rights, and care and respect for the Iranian population. Others argued that actively pursuing regime change is impossible. According to them an outreach program should have been conducted in 2009. Today, they argue, the situation is more difficult because the population has no access to the internet and it blames the West rather than the regime for the sanctions. It should be noticed that some suggested the possibility of negotiating directly with relevant factions of the Revolutionary Guards, thus bypassing Khamenei. Such a policy might be more realistic than trying to remove the Revolutionary Guards altogether.

Two main conflicting schools of thought regarding Iran's susceptibility to international pressure were discussed. Even without necessarily subscribing to the point of view of the current regime's instability, some argued that Iran is susceptible to pressure despite its totalitarian regime. The sanctions on Iran were imposed gradually and became harsh only recently. Moreover, sanctions take effect only gradually and cumulatively.

According to some reports, Iranians question Khamenei's policy. Many do not find Iran's nuclear policy (and the consequent sanctions) in the best interests of the nation. As a result, the current regime is losing support. Moreover, Khamenei controls through the business infrastructure at the hands of Revolutionary Guards factions. Thus, his entourage is close to him for financial reasons. Without economic backing the regime is expected to collapse in a year or two. The fear of such a collapse can be highly instrumental in changing the nuclear policy.

Moreover, Iranian history proves that major events pressuring the regime can bring about change in policy. For example, Khomeini stopped the Iran-Iraq War; more recently, in 2003, when the US invaded Iraq it was decided to suspend the enrichment program. In fact, based on past experience, when the regime has faced substantial pressure it has tended to respond without a clear strategy and at times even erratic behavior.

Furthermore, the situation in the Middle East has left Iran more isolated than before, and thus it has to rely more heavily than before on Russia and China. Finally, the sanctions on the Iranian bank caused severe damage to the economic sector, and especially to Khamenei's close circles. With no cash flow, the regime and its economy have been left isolated from other countries and less capable of conducting business. Thus, we might be at a turning point.

At the same time, some arguments against the utility of international pressure were also raised. First and foremost, the Iranian leadership believes that any policy change that is imposed from the outside is a grave mistake and an insult. Moreover, Iran does not believe it will be attacked, either by Israel or by the US. Furthermore, the Revolutionary Guards are quite indifferent to an attack. In fact, if an attack occurs, it might play into their hands, providing them with a justification to impose martial law. Finally, after such substantial costs, being so close to its goal, it will not easily give in. In 2006, when the program was at the beginning, there was chance for it to be terminated, but now it is too late.

International perspectives as well as alternatives for action were discussed. Some claimed that no clear red lines (beyond which a military action will take place) should be (or can be) drawn, and current sanctions should be given time to work. Specifically, Europe will have a hard time agreeing that the time for sanctions is over and that military action is required. In Europe, states, leaders, and populations fear an Israeli attack against Iran more than they fear Iran obtaining nuclear weapons. Moreover, some fear that the more that pressure is placed on Iran, the more it will increase its efforts, resulting in escalation. Instead of pressure, they believe Iran should be shown a way out, by creating a win-win situation.

Others criticized this logic. Iran's ambition to develop nuclear capabilities seems strong in any situation (whether pressured or not); moreover, pressure has caused Iran to take a step back rather than to redouble its efforts. Should Iran become nuclear, European states and populations should be afraid for their own security and their life, while if Israel were to attack Iran, life in Europe would continue as before. It should be noted that various opinions could be heard within Europe. The European point of view has shifted, and many today support increasing the pressure on Iran and even going beyond a policy of containment.

It was suggested that the West is totally dependent on the negotiating process to prevent Iran from achieving its goal, whereas Iran is not at all interested in a negotiated settlement that will mean giving up its goal of a military nuclear capability, and is only using negotiations to buy time. Time is playing against the international community. Iran is rushing ahead with its program in spite of the sanctions. Therefore severe pressure in needed to change Iran's calculations. Moreover, some red lines are in order. Iran should understand that the West is exhausting all tracks of non-military pressure. If all else fails, military action will be used.

Some stressed that President Obama did not put forth his definition of what constitutes a nuclear Iran, nor which red lines Iran should not cross, lest it be met with military attack. That is the major divergence between Israel and the United States. If Obama were to frame precise guidelines and red lines, it would both reassure Israel and deter Iran.

Others argued that no clear time barriers should be set as a part of possible red lines. However, giving the sanctions time to work while maintaining a credible threat of military action is desirable.

Another debate revolved around the issue of possible compromise with Iran. Some argued that it is unrealistic to impose a 5 percent enrichment limit on Iran. However, some compromise that will enable Iran to possess a civilian nuclear project is desirable. Others opposed any deal with Tehran. After all, Iran had previously cheated on its intentions and lost international trust.

The roundtable concluded with the posing of a few key questions: Do we have time for pressure to work? What are the red lines, if any? And what should be done if pressure fails?



l-r: Sima Shine, Sebastian Gräfe, Emily B. Landau