

Ahmadinezhad's Bomb Rhetoric: Opportunities for U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

On July 31, according to Iran's semiofficial Mehr News Agency, presidential chief of staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashai claimed that the West had raised no objections to President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's open proclamation that the Islamic Republic could build a nuclear bomb. How should this surprising claim be interpreted? And what implications might it hold for Iran's domestic politics, especially when viewed alongside Ahmadinezhad's history of confrontational rhetoric?

Mashai's Reported Remarks

Mashai's statement reportedly came as he was addressing the assembly of young advisors to the Ministry of Education. Rooz Online, a Britain-based website detested by the regime, analyzed reports on the speech from various semiofficial Iranian news outlets, such as Fars, the Iranian Students News Agency, and the Islamic Republic News Agency. Rooz noted that while other agencies reported rather bland comments, Mehr News Agency -- connected to the Supreme Leader's Islamic Propagation Organization -- gave a much blunter account.

According to Mehr's website, Mashai discussed Ahmadinezhad's February 7, 2010, speech at the National Center for Laser Science and Technology. Mashai reportedly said, "One of the points Dr. Ahmadinezhad announced during his visit to this center was the possibility of enriching to 100 percent, which means building an atom bomb [ke maani an sakht-e bomb-e atomi ast]. But it was interesting that not even one foreign media made a hullabaloo or an uproar. And this shows that they are not worried about an atom bomb. And essentially Dr. Ahmadinezhad had said this to test them in order to see what degree of worry they have about Iranian production of an atom bomb" (translation by the author).

One reason that no foreign media objected to Ahmadinezhad's supposed February comment is that there is no discernible evidence any Iranian media agency reported any such statement at the time. Numerous Iranian outlets announced the president's declaration that the regime was enriching uranium to 20 percent and could do more. Perhaps the February reports were toned-down versions of what Ahmadinezhad actually said, just as agencies other than Mehr may have toned down what Mashai said on July 31.

Interestingly, the week after Ahmadinezhad's February 7 speech, another important Iranian official publicly referred

to 100 percent enrichment. On February 15, a government-connected website (dolat.ir) posted a long interview with Ali Akbar Salehi, director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and former ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Near the end of the interview, Salehi repeatedly claimed that Iran has the legal right to enrich to 100 percent. That claim would be consistent with what often seems to be the regime's overall view -- namely, that the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty guarantees Iran the right to conduct any nuclear activity short of turning the last screw on a fully assembled weapon.

What Iranian Leaders Say about Iran's Objectives

According to Mehr, Mashai went on to say, "Today, when we are presented with an opportunity to alter world management, confining ourselves to small steps, while less costly, is not right." In fact, his reported remarks were full of comments about how this moment is a turning point in world history -- one in which international arrogance can be replaced by a new global management, if only Iran makes the necessary effort.

The chance to change the world is a theme close to Ahmadinezhad's heart. His August 2 speech on Iranian television was widely reported in the West in light of his proposal to debate President Obama in New York City in September. Less noted was his proposed theme for the debate: management of the world. "Why are they hostile to us?" he asked during that address. "Obviously the row is not over a bomb.... Democracy is not your problem either.... The row is over management. They want to come and occupy the Middle East and dominate the world through the Middle East.... My dears, their historic rule has come to an end.... A new era is starting, and a new wave is coming which is based on humanity, human dignity, monotheism, love, kindness, justice, and friendship.... Recently the American government has announced: 'We are ready to hold high level talks.' We said: 'Very well. We are all for talks.... We will put the international issues on the table and see who has a better solution for them....' We are saying frankly that we do not approve of their method of world management" (translation by BBC Monitoring).

If Ahmadinezhad truly believes that Iran can change the world order, that would seem to justify taking bold actions to hasten the day. Charging ahead for grand goals irrespective of the opinions of others would certainly fit the style that he has brought to Iranian domestic politics. He has made a habit of announcing controversial initiatives, such as his proposal to provide a \$1,900 grant for each child born as a way to boost population growth.

At the same time, his conflict with other hardliners has led to some sharp words from surprising sources, such as his longtime supporters in Kayhan, the Tehran newspaper closely affiliated with the Supreme Leader. On July 23, the paper's political editor, Mehdi Mohammadi, told a meeting of the ultrahardline group Ansar-e Hizballah, "In Iran, a new movement is appearing which wants to say that it's more revolutionary than the Supreme Leader. This new movement wants to pit the supporters of Hizballah in the society against the Supreme Leader, and to make this movement problematic for him. This new movement does not want to see the country in peace and tranquility. It even wants to vacate the surroundings of the Supreme Leader [of] others and only keep itself in his proximity. And when this happens, it will want to say, 'We are the only ones who stayed, therefore all authority should be surrendered to me because I won 25 million votes.'" The last line makes clear that the "new movement" is headed by Ahmadinezhad.

Opportunities for U.S. Policy

The more extravagant the objectives set by the hardliners, the more Iranians will worry about needlessly provocative rhetoric isolating their country. According to the Saham News website, the two most public faces of the opposition Green Movement -- 2009 presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi (with whom Saham is affiliated) -- met on August 2 and issued a statement which said in part, "The reckless decisions and comments of these men [the hardliners] have caused the belittling of our people in the world and have brought about threats in addition to a wide-ranging set of sanctions against the country.... The number of friendly countries and so-

called allies does not even add up to the number of fingers on a hand."

As Ahmadinezhad's extravagant policies and claims increasingly isolate him, the United States has greater opportunities to effect change via its policy of offering Tehran a sharp choice between harsh measures and isolation if the nuclear impasse continues, or respect and economic growth if Iran lives up to its international obligations, particularly if it addresses human rights alongside the nuclear issue. The United States has every interest in encouraging what increasingly seems a lively debate inside Iran regarding the wisdom of Ahmadinezhad's confrontational approach to his foreign and domestic critics.

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