

Iran Feels the Heat:

International Pressure Emboldens Tehran's Domestic Critics

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Jan 18, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

As international pressure on the Iranian government toughens, the Iranian regime is facing more fragmentation at home. In an unprecedented action against a sitting president, 150 of the 290 members of the Iranian Majlis (parliament) signed a letter blaming President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad for raging inflation and high unemployment, and criticizing his travel to Latin America at a time when he has not sent the Majlis a draft budget for the fiscal year that starts March 21. Under Iranian law, this letter constitutes the first step required if the Majlis wants to remove the president from office.

U.S. Pressure on Iran and Its Immediate Results

Since the UN Security Council's December 23, 2006, approval of limited sanctions against Iran, the United States has stepped up pressure on Tehran. On January 9, the Treasury Department banned U.S. dollar transactions to be conducted by a second Iranian bank, Bank Sepah. In his January 10 speech, President George W. Bush used an uncompromising tone, saying, "Iran is providing material support for attacks on American troops." A few hours before he spoke, U.S. forces raided an Iranian office in Irbil, in northern Iraq, and detained five staff members. Then, on January 16, a meeting of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, with the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, and the six Gulf monarchies issued a statement with a veiled warning to Iran.

The freshly toughened U.S. policy toward Iran seems to be having tangible results. On January 14, Ali Larijani, Iran's top nuclear negotiator, met with Saudi King Abdullah. Larijani delivered a letter—variously described as being from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei or Ahmadinezhad—asking the Saudis, on behalf of the Iranian government, to send the U.S. government a message asserting Iran's goodwill toward the United States and Tehran's interest in corporation with Washington. King Abdullah evidently refused; after meeting Rice, Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal told journalists that his country would not play the role of intermediary between the United States and Iran.

As interesting as what has happened is what has not—namely, the Iranian government and press barely mentioned the U.S. raid on the Iranian facility in Irbil. When it happened, Ahmadinezhad was visiting Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. This would seem like a propitious moment for Ahmadinezhad to harshly condemn the United States, but he did not do so.

In his two most recent speeches, Khamenei warned Arab leaders not to buy “the U.S. deception” that Iran and Shiites are a threat, arguing they should not fear Iran’s power and warning them not to provoke conflict between Shiites and Sunnis. He seems to be reacting to the negative impact that Iran’s nuclear program and its activities in Iraq have had on its image in the Arab world. There has been recent backlash. For example, on January 7, Fatah supporters at a mass rally in Gaza chanted “Shia, Shia” to denounce Hamas for its support of Iran. Khamenei may also be worried that Arab concern over Iran is driving countries such as Saudi Arabia to increase their cooperation with the United States on a wide range of issues, including countering the influence of the Iranian-backed Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories.

Increasing Controversy inside the Regime

Prior to the UN Security Council sanctions resolution, Iranian reformers voiced only sporadic opposition against the country’s nuclear policy. They have now stepped up their rhetoric. More significantly, conservatives are also speaking up. Two moderately conservative papers have criticized the nuclear policy. Hamshahri—the most widely read newspaper in Iran, whose director, Hossein Entezami, is a member of Iran’s nuclear negotiating team—recently ran an article complaining, “At the very moment when the nuclear issue was about to move away from the UN Security Council, the fiery speeches of the president have resulted in the adoption of two resolutions [against Iran].” The lead editorial in the January 9 issue of Jomhuri Islami complained about Ahmadinezhad’s rhetoric, asking, “What is the need for such a tone which would provide the bully with a pretext to increase the pressures? . . . The manner of publicizing the nuclear issue in your speeches is such which suggests to the audience that, Heaven forbid, you are giving so much prominence to the nuclear issue so that the problems of the government cannot be seen.”

Criticism of Ahmadinezhad’s failure to deliver on exaggerated promises are widely voiced by those who previously supported him, as are complaints about his high-handed manner. The hardline Kayhan, which had been his most ardent defender, weighed in on January 17, with its editor Mehdi Mohammadi writing about the Ahmadinezhad government, “People expect to see signs of improvement, but what they see is not that much according to what they expect. . . . [The people] always consider themselves the judge of the government’s activities and not a silent follower of its orders. . . . Consultation is different from giving concessions, resoluteness is different from being headstrong, and self-confidence is different from absolutism. . . . The government should not forget that one cannot fight on a hundred fronts simultaneously.” In the December municipal elections, the Iranian president picked fights with fellow conservatives, putting them up against his own slate. However, Ahmadinezhad’s ticket was clobbered, winning only two seats (one by his sister) on the fifteen-member Tehran municipal council. Even his credentials as a guardian of Islamic values is questioned, most recently through wide circulation of a film clip showing his deputy applauding dancing women in Turkey.

Decline of the President—or Change in the Supreme Leader’s Policy?

Public criticism of the supreme leader is strictly forbidden inside Iran, but Iranian media or political figures can, to some extent, criticize the president’s agenda. But criticizing him over substantial issues of diplomacy or nuclear policy seems to require the tacit approval of the supreme leader. The puzzle is why Khamenei allows domestic criticism of Iranian nuclear or regional policy when he himself has the final say on both. It seems that by allowing critics to blame Ahmadinezhad, the supreme leader is making Ahmadinezhad a scapegoat for the negative consequences of Khamenei’s own recent decisions. In addition, weakening Ahmadinezhad may diminish international pressure on Iran.

Iran is filled with rumors that Ahmadinezhad may not be allowed to finish his current four-year term, which expires in 2009. But it seems more likely that he will stay in office even as the attacks on him increase. Removal of a president who came to power with the support of the supreme leader, seminary hardliners, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps would be very difficult for the regime to explain to its supporters and to the Iranian

people in general. It seems much more likely that Khamenei will prefer to keep Ahmadinezhad as a weak president, as he did the two earlier presidents—Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami.

In sum, it seems that the decline of Ahmadinezhad is in fact the decline of the supreme leader’s current policies. This could well mean that Khamenei may become more flexible toward the West, especially the United States.

Mehdi Khalaji, a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute, is author of [The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=250) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=250>) (2006). ❖

Policy #1185

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)