IRANIAN NATIONAL-SECURITY DEBATES: Factions and Lost Opportunities

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Iran’s national-security policy is a victim of the factional debates and disagreements that characterize the Islamic Republic’s political system. There are currently three main factions in Iran — the radicals, the traditionalist conservatives and the reformers — and each has its own approach and agenda in relation to the country’s national-security policy. Of the various national-security issues confronting Iranian policy makers, six tend to be more pressing than others. They include the war in Iraq, Iran’s regional standing, U.S. goals and agendas in relation to the Middle East in general and Iran in particular, relations with Hezbollah, Iranian-Hamas relations and the nuclear program. Because of the factions’ key differences in style and approach toward these issues, the “suspended equilibrium” that characterizes the larger political system often finds its way into Iranian national-security policy. The result is often “mixed signals” from Tehran or, worse yet, indecision and lost opportunities.

To better understand the nature and consequences of policy debates in Iran on national security, it helps to know the institutional arrangements of the political system, whereby multiple and overlapping centers of power often compete with one another for influence. The constitutional setup, as we shall see shortly, easily lends itself to a Balkanization of the state at the highest levels and facilitates the pursuit of competing agendas and differing policies by those in charge of state institutions. With the state already lacking institutional cohesion, factionalism and factional alliances thrive, although both the positions of the various factions on different issues and their alliances with one another change depending on the circumstances or the nature of the issues at hand. The result is the inability of the state to articulate and stick to a coherent set of policies in both the domestic and the international arenas. Meanwhile, international developments, not the least of which are U.S.-led efforts aimed at curbing both Iran’s regional influence and its nuclear program, often play determining roles in forcing the hands of one faction over another or, at times, even marginalizing one or more factions to the benefit of others.

OVERVIEW

The political system of the Islamic Republic is made up of a series of highly
complex institutional arrangements, whereby institutions with similar or competing roles often check and balance out each other’s powers, perform overlapping functions and, theoretically at least, prevent any one center of power from gaining undue influence over the entire system (figure 1). This highly intertwined institutional web is partly a product of deliberate constitutional engineering — both when the constitution was originally written in 1979 and when it was substantially revised in 19891 — and partly a result of institutional “path dependence,” whereby some of the main institutions of the state replicate themselves in an effort to enhance their power and influence throughout the system.2 Whatever the actual cause, the Iranian state today comprises multiple centers of almost equal power and responsibility, presided over by the supreme leader.

This institutional arrangement easily lends itself to a Balkanization of the state among multiple centers of power, a division that goes beyond checks and balances and frequently results in friction and competition among state elites at the highest levels. In fact, it was due to precisely this kind of institutional deadlock between the Majles (parliament) and the Guardian Council — which effectively functions as a parliamentary upper house — that the Expediency Council, designed to mediate between the two bodies, was established in the 1989 constitution. So far, however, this and other similar efforts have not significantly enhanced the state’s institutional cohesion, and an almost deliberate condition of “suspended equilibrium” continues to characterize the Islamic Republic’s power structure.3 If these institutions happen to fall under the control of groups with

differing agendas and policy priorities, as has been the case now for over two decades, factional rivalries manifest themselves at the highest levels of the state. In fact, as one observer of Iranian politics has noted, “Rather than serve as an autonomous regulator and arbiter of such rivalry, the state is the principal arena in which the competition (over power and influence) takes place. Rival claims over parts of the state and its resources are constantly played out, at times with considerable acrimony.”

For the most part, the electorate and the populace at large play marginal roles in the state’s factional rivalries. Theoretically, supreme authority rests with the electorate, which chooses the president, the 290 members of the Majles, the municipal councils and the 83-member Assembly of Experts, which in turn elects the leader (rahbar) (figure 2). In reality, however, political power emanates from the leader, who not only ratifies the electorate’s choice of president but also directly appoints figures to and oversees a host of key state institutions (figure 3).

The leader is the ultimate authority in the Islamic Republic. Overseer of the entire system, his primary task is to ensure its longevity and survival. As such, issues of vital political and military importance fall under his direct control, be it the appointment and supervision of military commanders and the judiciary or the direction of international negotiations over the nuclear program. By virtue of his position, the leader remains above the factional fray, often playing the role of final arbiter and stepping in if and
when factional rivalries threaten the system’s survival. This is not to imply, of course, that the current leader, Ali Khamenei, does not have ideological and agenda preferences of his own. A former president of the republic, Ayatollah Khamenei is generally considered to be a conservative traditionalist, preferring the spread and preservation of traditionalist Islamic values throughout society on the domestic front and the pursuit of a cautiously Islamist foreign policy in the international arena. He has been careful, however, not to be identified too closely with any of the main factions vying for greater power and influence, often maintaining a calculated degree of aloofness from factional debates and disagreements.

**FACTIONAL ALLIANCES AND SHIFTING POSITIONS**

Some of Ayatollah Khamenei’s reluctance to take part in factional politics may be due to the dynamic and highly fluid nature of alliances and the positions that the different factions might take on specific issues. It is extremely difficult to get an accurate reading of the complex maze of Iranian factional politics. Each faction is made up of a number of smaller groups whose positions may shift over time. Alternatively, a group’s position may overlap with those of other groups associated with another faction. The boundaries separating factions are often blurred and undefined, with tremendous fluidity and changing positions characterizing various groupings and alliances.

In broad terms, the fault lines that divide the factions from one another tend to be ideological. Beginning soon after the success of the revolution, divisions began occurring within the camp of the victorious religious revolutionaries, who were busy trying to institutionalize a new order. Within a decade, as different visions of the future direction of the revolution became entrenched, factional politics had become a marked feature of the post-revolutionary establishment. With the end of the so-called "first republic" in 1988-89, signified by the passing of Ayatollah Khomeini in
1988 and the end of the war with Iraq the following year, the limited political openings of the state in the second and third republics resulted in a small degree of political flexibility and more elbow room for activists, academics, journalists and other opinion makers. This was particularly the case with the Khatami presidency (1997-2005), during which the president’s relatively open social and political policies had the unintended consequence of heightening institutional and ideological competition among the country’s political elites.

Keeping in mind the fluidity of the factions’ positions and the alliances formed both within and among them, three broad groupings may be discerned in today’s Iran. At the center are conservative traditionalists (mohafezehkaran), who form one of the main pillars of the regime’s support. The majority of this group is composed of clerics and religious personages based in Qom or Tehran, including some key figures in the Association of Qom Seminary Teachers and others most readily identified with former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Another notable group often associated with this camp is the Association of Militant Clergy (Jameeh Rowhaniyyat-e Mobarez), influential conservative clerics who organized themselves semiformally in the early 1980s and soon became dominant in the Guardian Council, the Special Court for the Clergy and the Assembly of Experts. Along with ratifying bills passed by the Majles, the Guardian Council is responsible for vetting parliamentary and presidential candidates. The Special Court for the Clergy ensures the doctrinal conformity of the clerical class and frequently imprisons nonconformist clerics. The Assembly of Experts elects the leader. Also closely affiliated with the conservatives is a group of regime technocrats and bureaucratic insiders, many of whom belong to the Servants of Construction (Kargozaran-e Sazandegi) party, which is one of the few political parties officially licensed to operate. Most Friday prayer imams, who also act as the leader’s representatives to the provinces, also identify themselves with the conservative camp.

The conservatives are thus in strategic control of most key institutions of the state, extending from the office of the leader at the top into the depths of the bureaucracy, and can therefore shape and influence the overall policy postures of the Islamic Republic in a variety of ways. Moreover, the conservatives enjoy widespread support among members of the lower middle classes, lower-ranking preachers, and bazaari merchants, all of whom favor a “continued commitment to Islamic ideology” and the promotion of a “mercantile economy and the right to private property.” As such, the conservatives form the main factional grouping within the Islamic Republic.

Beginning in the mid- to late 1980s, a number of clerics and other groups formerly affiliated with the conservatives began advocating more pragmatic approaches to domestic and international issues, and in some respects even began calling for moderation and reform of both the state and its policies. In 1988, in fact, more moderate clerics broke off from the Association of Militant Clergy and formed their own rival group, the Society for Militant Clerics (Majma-e Rowhaniyoun-e Mobarez), and concentrated on getting their candidates elected to the Majles. In 1997, the group now clearly identified as the “reformists” (eslahtalaban) achieved
the unthinkable by getting its candidate, Mohammad Khatami, elected to the presidency.

Capitalizing on a long tradition of “nationalist-religious” activism (mellimazhabi) going back to the 1950s and the 1960s, the reformists quickly attracted widespread support from the intelligentsia — academics, writers, journalists and former political figures — and from large segments of the middle classes. They became particularly attractive to the country’s growing university student population, for whom the reformists’ messages of moderation, reform and greater opening to the outside world — captured in Khatami’s slogans about civil society and “dialogue among civilizations” — were especially resonant. The National Participation (Mosharekat-e Melli) party and the Islamic Revolution Mujahedeen, both of whom are made up of civil-service and private-sector professionals as well as moderate clerics, also became two of the reformists’ main sources of support.

During most of Khatami’s two terms in office, what the reformists had going for them was electoral popularity and the widespread enthusiasm of the urban middle classes, especially in Tehran. What they lacked, however, was meaningful political power and the institutional resources necessary to push their agendas through and to translate them into official state policy. Following their shocking defeat in 1997, the conservatives quickly regrouped and made up for lost ground. Khatami’s popularity was too overwhelming to prevent his re-election in 2001, but in the elections to the seventh Majles, thousands of candidates suspected of having reformist credentials, including most incumbent reformist deputies, were barred from running (by the Guardian Council), and the Majles reverted to conservative control.

Although Khamenei never quite rebuffed the president, he did not hide his preference for the status quo and, in many of his speeches and his meetings with clerics and officials, he expressed unease with the pace and the goals of reform. The Friday prayer imams were less restrained in their criticism of the president and especially his reformist allies, frequently attacking their revolutionary credentials and calling into question their “true intentions.”

Faced with insurmountable obstacles, the reform movement ground to a halt by the middle of Khatami’s second term in office. The president’s once unrivaled support among the middle classes all but dissipated, and many of his own former supporters began calling on him to resign as a last gesture of defiance. Khatami defended his record in a tract entitled “A Letter for Tomorrow” in which he warned against the danger posed to the country by

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“the reactionary trend with a superficial outlook.”8 But defending his record did little to remedy the organizational and institutional shortcomings of the reformist camp. By the time the 2005 presidential elections rolled around, the reformists were at a distinct disadvantage, capable of neither rallying public enthusiasm based on their past record nor fielding candidates with genuine popularity among urban voters. The door was left open for an alternative, an unknown figure whose message differed radically from that of both the conservatives and the reformists.

From the earliest days of the revolution, a group of diehard revolutionaries saw it as their mission to actively defend the Islamic revolution from its enemies abroad and inside the country. Many volunteered to serve in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Baseej forces, and, at a time when most young middle-class Iranians clamored to avoid compulsory military service, a number of them achieved national renown for their heroics in the war against Iraq. By the time the war ended, many had either reached command positions within the IRGC or had made their way into the state bureaucracy, most having become provincial administrators and governors. These “radicals” are ardent believers in the original populist slogans of the revolution — supporting the disadvantaged and the destitute, fighting corruption and defending the Islamic Republic against its enemies. Their goals and platforms are not very clearly articulated, and, unlike the two other camps, they have not yet developed clear organizational or party affiliations. In the run-up to the 2005 presidential elections, a small group calling itself the Abadgaran-e Iran-e Eslami began rallying around Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the mayor of Tehran and a leading voice within the resuscitated radical camp. Today, the Abadgaran have disappeared into the shadows once again, and for now, at least, they do not appear to be much of an organizational force with which the others need to compete.

The 2005 elections offered a textbook example of the uncertainties of electoral politics even under the most controlled circumstances. Seven candidates made it through the Guardian Council’s vetting process. They included two “reformists” — Mostafa Moin, a bland and uninspiring former minister of education, and Mehdi Karrubi, the speaker of parliament and a leading figure within the Society for Militant Clerics. Former president Rafsanjani also threw in his hat, but “only reluctantly” and out of “a sense of duty to serve the Islamic Republic at a critical juncture in its history.” He was widely considered to be the establishment candidate and the leading choice of the conservative mainstream, including Ayatollah Khamenei. The radicals, meanwhile, were represented by the energetic Ahmadinejad.

The story of the election is well-known. Only 60 percent of the eligible voters went to the polls, most Tehranis boycotting the election in protest over the mass disqualification of reformist candidates. With the reformists’ votes either absent or split between Moin and Karrubi, and with Ahmadinejad launching a vigorous campaign, especially in the provinces, no candidate was able to secure a majority in the elections. Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad garnered 21 percent and 19.5 percent of the vote, respectively. The reformists threw their weight behind Rafsanjani, but their belated and half-hearted support was too little and too late
to stop Ahmadinejad’s momentum. A second round of elections was held, with Ahmadinejad securing some 61 percent of the votes cast, as compared to Rafsanjani’s 35 percent. The radicals had won the office of the presidency.

The 2005 presidential elections ushered in an alliance between the reformists and the conservatives, one that as of this writing still holds. The two camps appear to have reached broad consensus over Iran’s national security, although pronounced differences continue to mark their approach to the country’s internal politics. This alliance is sustained by an ideological affinity born of current circumstances and the defensive predicaments in which both groups find themselves. To be sure, there are pronounced ideological differences between the conservatives and reformers when it comes to such internal political issues as the state’s basis of legitimacy, acceptable interpretations of Islam, and the role of Islam in culture, society and politics. These fundamental ideological differences over the nature of the ideal polity do not extend to the field of international relations, however, where the two camps tend to differ on degree and perhaps even method but not on basic objectives. Compared to the radicals, both the conservatives and the reformers favor moderation and a warming of relations between Iran and the rest of the world.

When in office, the moderates were eager to achieve these objectives relatively quickly, whereas the conservatives favored a slower pace. But the underlying assumptions of the two groups were basically the same. Now, faced with a president whose goals and style of diplomacy are very different, the conservatives and reformers appear to have coalesced into one camp where foreign and national-security policy are concerned.

Meanwhile, the radicals who had won the presidency were also able to control some of the upper echelons of the state bureaucracy. Given Ahmadinejad’s background and experiences, they are also thought to have significant support among the IRGC. But most of the Qom-based clergy, with the notable exception of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, with whom the president is closely allied, are supportive of the conservatives. Although the radicals do not control most of the state’s key institutions other than the presidency, Ahmadinejad’s style and image appear to have given them an inflated significance within the larger complex of Iranian politics. This undeserved importance has much to do with the president’s style. Specifically, Ahmadinejad’s populist rhetoric concerning domestic political issues and his endless and loud proclamations in defense of Iran’s international interests often force the hands of others...
throughout the political system. Using his bully pulpit, in his many speeches before cheering crowds in Tehran and especially in the provinces, Ahmadinejad enunciates what appears to be official state policy, making it difficult for others to openly challenge and criticize him. In reality, however, the president represents only one of the many views that exist within the Islamic Republic. Also, the president’s blunt and often undiplomatic speeches frequently provoke reactions from the international community, and especially from the United States, to which the whole system then has to react. Whether by design or unintentionally, thanks largely to the president’s brash style and populist rhetoric, the radicals find themselves in a position of significance that is disproportionate to their actual control of key political institutions.

**Factional Approaches to Security**

There are currently six key national security issues, and in regard to almost all of them there are competing approaches from the radicals on the one side and the conservative-reformist alliance on the other. These issues include Iraq, Iran’s role within the Persian Gulf and in the larger Middle East, Iran’s relations with Hamas as well as with Hezbollah, the American factor and, of course, the nuclear program. Of these six issues, there is only consensus between the two groups over the Hezbollah, which both sides see as a legitimate organization that is rightfully engaged in a struggle for the protection of Lebanese Shiites and others from Israeli attacks. The threat of Israel is real and constant, and Hezbollah therefore needs to remain an armed organization that will defend Lebanese sovereignty and its Shiite citizens when necessary.

It would, of course, be a mischaracterization of Hezbollah to consider it to be a pawn of the Iranian or, for that matter, the Syrian foreign-policy establishments. There is some evidence that Iran’s policy consensus over Hezbollah translates into tangible military assistance to the group. Also, as the summer 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel starkly demonstrated, the organization’s military capabilities far surpassed what others had estimated them to be. It could not have achieved them without foreign support, most probably from both Tehran and Damascus.

Despite the consensus over Hezbollah, Iranian radicals and the conservatives and reformists differ on the remaining five issues related to national-security policy. Insofar as Hamas is concerned, the two camps approach it within the broader context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Neither side, of course, recognizes Israel. The conservative-reformist alliance, however, does not openly advocate the destruction of Israel. In fact, some reformists and conservatives have at times come very close to a de facto recognition of the Jewish state. During the presidency of Rafsanjani in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, both the president and the foreign minister at the time, Ali Akbar Velayati, even went so far as to maintain that Iran would not be opposed to a “mutually satisfactory” resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Within this broader perspective, Hamas is seen as a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and a significant force in any potential scenario involving a two-state solution.
For the radicals, however, even a de facto acknowledgement of Israel’s right to exist is tantamount to a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Their solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict involves only one state, a Palestinian one, and Hamas is the rightful heir to that state.\footnote{12} Whereas the conservative-reformist alliance, especially the conservatives, prefer Hamas to be one of the main actors involved in any possible solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the radicals see Hamas as the only actor legitimately positioned to achieve full and unconditional victory for the Palestinians. President Ahmadinejad’s hopes to see Israel “wiped off the face of the map” are well-known. Evoking the image of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom in Karbala in a recent speech, he reminded his listeners that all places on earth are Karbalas, and that “with God’s grace, we will soon witness the collapse of the Zionist regime and the destruction of America.”\footnote{13}

The three remaining issues — Iran’s standing in the region, its role in and relationship with Iraq, and Iran’s relations with the United States — are all closely intertwined. In broad terms, the conservatives and reformers believe that security in the Middle East should be a regional rather than an international issue. Consequently, there should be cooperative efforts among the various Middle Eastern states aimed at ensuring the region’s security and stability. Their preferred option is multilateralism at the regional level, which would in turn enhance Iran’s standing both regionally and internationally. According to Mohsen Aminzadeh, a deputy foreign minister in the Khatami administration, the reformists left behind a proud record of having improved Iran’s relations with the European Union as well as with Iran’s neighbors and with the United Nations; they made significant progress in the nuclear negotiations and they also reduced tensions with the United States.\footnote{14}

The radicals, on the other hand, consider Iran to be the region’s leading military power, and as such the country must necessarily play the leading role in the region’s security architecture. The United States currently plays this role. In a speech in February 2007, General Safavi, commander of the IRGC, maintained that Iran is engaged in a “historic competition” with the United States, implying that the competition is over greater hegemony in the Middle East.\footnote{15} “The great and powerful Islamic country of Iran has the biggest say in the security of the Middle East,” he said, “and the United States cannot make any changes to the region’s security architecture without taking into account Iran’s national interests.”\footnote{16} A few days later, he went so far as to say that Iran’s military and intelligence forces “not only provide for the security and protection of the nation, but they provide and determine the security of the Middle East.”\footnote{17} A recent commentary in Resalat, one of Tehran’s leading radical newspapers, is indicative of the radicals’ perception of Iran’s position in the Middle East:

The ground forces of the Revolutionary Guards are now the leading military power in the Middle East because of this unsurpassed regional superiority of their size, armaments, technology, battlefield experience and, more than anything else, the martyrdom-seeking spirit of their personnel.\footnote{18}

“The global power and influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran have frightened the United States,” proclaimed another
recent commentary in *Resalat,* “and White House officials are worried that if Iran’s spiritual powers are complemented with scientific and technological know-how, the United States and the international status quo (that it has created) can no longer impose their will on people around the world. That is why they are opposed to Iran’s peaceful nuclear program.”

According to Aminzadeh, the former deputy foreign minister, Iranian radicals would like to engage in a cold war with the United States, whereby an Iranian alliance with Russia, India and China, along with a number of other ideologically inclined states, would present a formidable front against American global aspirations. Their opponents, however, acknowledge the end of the Cold War and the subsequent emergence of a unipolar world headed by the United States. In their view, a country like Iran can still play a significant international role within such a global environment by maximizing its interests and capitalizing on its position and its resources. Key here is a proper, objective understanding of international dynamics and trends, and the pursuit of a conciliatory diplomacy that would create opportunities for profit maximization.

In the radicals’ formulation, one of the primary areas in which a cold war with the United States ought to take place is in the Middle East. For some time now, U.S.-Iranian relations are best characterized as “a clash of hegemonies” in relation to the Persian Gulf and the rest of the Middle East. But for Iranian radicals, the country’s influence and standing in the Middle East is more than a question of regional competition with the United States. For them, Iran is a center of Islamic power, and from Iran Islam grows and thrives throughout the region. It is this centrality of Iran to the Islamization of the rest of the Middle East that most frightens the United States. In the words of Habibollah Asgaroladi, one of Iran’s most renowned radicals and the secretary-general of an organization called the Front for the Path of Imam and Leadership, “(George) Bush cannot turn into autumn the spring of Islamization across the Middle East.”

It is precisely this Islamization of Iraq, along a path similar to that already taken by Iran, against which the Americans are futilely struggling. Both Iranian factions see as positive the way in which general developments in post-Saddam Iraq have unfolded: the emergence of a political system under the influence of Iraq’s Shiite majority and headed by leaders who generally have strong emotional and other ties to Iran. But the two camps differ on the specifics of how to end Iraq’s civil war and what Iran’s role in the country should be from this point on.

Consistent with its overall approach to Iran’s foreign policy in relation to the rest of the region, the conservative-reformist alliance favors a regionally generated and directed solution to the Iraqi civil war, one that would most likely include Saudi Arabia, Egypt and perhaps even countries of the EU. “Iran is not,” Rafsanjani has said on a number of occasions, “looking for adventurism” either in Iraq or in relation to the nuclear issue. The radicals, on the other hand, see it primarily as Iran’s responsibility — by virtue of the country’s military prowess, its diplomatic stature and its role as a bastion of political Islam — to play a leading role in the efforts aimed at ending the bloodshed in Iraq.

Similar differences characterize the two factions’ approach to international
economic issues, especially insofar as foreign investments and the importation of technology from abroad are concerned. Given America’s deep-seated hostility toward Iran and its global and regional competition with the Islamic Republic, Iranian radicals argue that Iran must stand on its own feet and achieve technological and military advances on its own. Self-reliance and technical independence are among the main slogans of the radicals, and Ahmadinejad and others in his camp constantly emphasize the importance of scientific and technological accomplishments as a way to enhance Iran’s regional and international status.26 The West, they maintain, is determined to keep Iran technologically subordinate, and in so doing it creates obstacles and difficulties designed to impede Iranian scientific advances.

For their part, although the conservatives and the reformers do not argue against the need for self-sufficiency in science and technology, progress lies in Iran’s greater integration into the global economy. They frequently boast about their record in reducing Iran’s global economic isolation and attracting a growing number of foreign investors.28 There is nothing redeeming, Aminzadeh remarks wryly, about following the North Korean model of economic development.29

The differences between the two camps in their approaches to Iran’s acquisition of science and technology also characterize their approaches to the nuclear issue. Both sides agree that Iran must have access to nuclear technology. What they disagree over is the means to achieving this end or, more accurately, the price they are willing to pay in order to accomplish the same goal. Iran’s nuclear program, it is important to note, accelerated in 1999, at a time when the reformists were in power, with the program up until then — especially in the 1980s, when the conservatives were dominant — having been characterized by “persistence and incrementalism.”30 When it was revealed in mid-2002 that Iran had built undeclared fuel-cycle facilities, Iran became eager to allay the fears of the international community through negotiations with the EU-3 (Britain, France and Germany), but its negotiating tactics proved counterproductive; it only managed to arouse further suspicion among the parties concerned, as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency and the United States.31 In June 2005, soon after Ahmadinejad’s election, Iran served notice of its intention to resume the enrichment activities it had suspended during the negotiations, rejected an incentives package proposed by the EU, resumed enrichment the following August, and adopted a
more belligerent posture toward the EU, the IAEA and the United States, which by now had become directly involved in the matter.\(^{32}\) Since then, it has shrugged off threats of progressively stronger UN sanctions or even U.S. military strikes, or both.

According to Iran’s former chief negotiator to the IAEA, Hassan Rowhani, Iranian decision making with regard to the nuclear issue takes place at four levels. Some of the technical discussions on policy issues take place in the Foreign Ministry and are led by one of the department heads there. More substantive discussions also occur at the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). A third level is made-up of a ministerial committee whose meetings also take place at the SNSC. The fourth level, where actual decisions are made, consists of the “heads of the system,” which presumably include, among a few others, the leader, the president, Rafsanjani, and the head of the SNSC, who is also the chief nuclear negotiator (currently Ali Larijani).\(^{33}\) It is at this level where the actual negotiating strategy is determined and key decisions about the nuclear issue are made.

Since the nuclear issue — and the international context within which it is unfolding — is a matter that has significance for the whole system, decisions regarding it are made directly by the leader’s office. But the factional approaches to it are not unimportant. If Khamenei or his office were the sole decision maker in regard to the nuclear issue, Iran’s relations with the IAEA and the EU-3 would not have changed from one of relative conciliation during the Khamati administration to one of intransigent belligerence so far during the Ahmadinejad presidency. Admittedly, some of the change in the tone of negotiations can be traced back to the Europeans’ anticipation of a harder line from Ahmadinejad and their reaction to it before he had actually assembled a new negotiating team. But Iran’s posture did indeed change, and in that sense the importance of domestic factional politics and their different approaches cannot be denied.

Clearly, although the leader is the ultimate decision maker, he does not want to alienate one faction completely or to only favor another faction. He thus allows a certain degree of leeway to the faction “in power,” especially insofar as discussions and actions at the three levels below his office are concerned, while continuing to retain ultimate decision-making power himself.

Through their conduct in office, each of the two main factions have so far demonstrated their preferred approach to the nuclear issue. Both camps, of course, agree that it is in the country’s national interest to master nuclear technology and to generate nuclear energy. But, whereas the reformists (and presumably also the conservatives) are willing to be more measured in their methods of getting there, the radicals are less patient and willing to subject Iran to the dictates of what they see as a fundamentally unfair set of preconditions. Keen to lower tensions and to show the country’s willingness to cooperate with the EU and IAEA, when the reformists were in power, they were willing to suspend enrichment for the life of the negotiations and were eager to come up with a win-win compromise whereby Iran would continue its nuclear activities under a presumably toughened IAEA inspection regime.\(^{34}\) The radicals, on the other hand, claim that the EU, which acts at the behest of the United States, and the IAEA are both “bullies” and, in Ahmadinejad’s words, “are determined to prevent Iran’s progress and advancement”: 
They know that when we master this technology we will be among the seven or eight advanced countries of the world, and all of their false propaganda will be exposed as lies.\textsuperscript{35}

Conciliatory gestures and concessions, the radicals maintain, only emboldened the West to demand that Iran give up more. According to a commentary on www.Baztab.com, a web site with known radical tendencies, Iran has accomplished far more technological breakthroughs in the eighteen months since Ahmadinejad’s election, during which time it has toughened its negotiating stand, than it did in the two years when it searched for ways to accommodate the EU and the IAEA.\textsuperscript{36}

Significantly, as international tensions rise over Iran’s nuclear program and over Ahmadinejad’s diplomacy in general, the different factions appear to have become increasingly entrenched in their positions, each side even more convinced of the wisdom of its positions. And, the more entrenched the competing factions become in their advocacy of different approaches to national-security issues, the more delicate a balancing act Khamenei has to play and the more pronounced the consequences on Iranian policy making in general and its diplomacy in particular. Not surprisingly, the suspended equilibrium that characterizes the system institutionally gets perpetuated and magnified as it seeks to formulate policies in relation to issues of domestic and international significance.

\section*{Consequences of Factionalism}

The radicals’ stance toward Israel is a prime example of a faction’s efforts to enhance its stature and influence within Iran’s highly complicated and complex political system. As the institutional arrangements of the system indicate, the Islamic Republic’s multiple decision-making centers are often meant to duplicate and balance each other out. Decision making is therefore often slow and deliberate, a product of competition and compromise with most decisions being ultimately made by the leader, who is given additional advice and suggestions by his own army of official and unofficial advisers.

There have long been rumors of the leader’s unease over Ahmadinejad’s style and his incendiary speeches. If this is indeed the case, so far Khamenei has not taken active steps to rein in his president. In fact, some have argued that Khamenei “finds himself in a more comfortable position today than during Khatami’s presidency, when he played the part of conservative bulwark against proposed reformist changes.”\textsuperscript{37} Nevertheless, Khamenei has indeed been playing a more delicate balancing act since Ahmadinejad’s presidency, chastising those officials who have been too critical of the president while shifting more responsibility for supervising policy implementation to the Expediency Council, which is headed by Rafsanjani. Additionally, in June 2006, Khamenei constituted a new foreign-policy advisory council that is made up of two former foreign ministers, a former defense minister, and a former ambassador.

These and other balancing acts notwithstanding, the factional competition that characterizes the highest echelons of power within the Iranian state has a number of policy consequences, all of them negative from an Iranian perspective. One notable result is the phenomenon of "mixed signals" for which the Iranian government has become notorious, with multiple
officials of equal or similar responsibilities often making completely different statements about the same issue. On a number of occasions, the head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Agency has said one thing, only to be contradicted by the foreign minister, who is in turn corrected by the head of the Supreme National Security Council. Although these mixed signals, and the multiplicity of power centers and agendas that give rise to them, have not brought on an outright paralysis of the political system, they have significantly eroded the effectiveness of Iranian diplomacy.

More specifically, internal rivalries and the resulting attention and resources that are directed toward conflict management have undermined the state’s ability to engage in direct and proactive diplomacy. Instead, Iranian diplomacy frequently finds itself in a reactive posture, often merely responding to circumstances and conditions as they emerge instead of creating opportunities or, even less, setting the agenda. Iranian setbacks at the UN Security Council in recent months have as much to do with the country’s inability to mobilize international support for itself as they do with aggressive American lobbying and agenda-setting in relation to Iran. Ahmadinejad, meanwhile, occasionally finds himself needing to ratchet up his populist rhetoric, sacrificing substance for style.

Clearly, the conduct of U.S. foreign policy and the rhetoric of American leaders toward Iran are not unimportant in influencing the positions and the relative strengths and agendas of each of the Iranian factions. As far back as 2002, when President Bush branded Iran a member of an “Axis of Evil,” those Iranians who had hoped for improved relations with the United States and with the West in general went on the defensive. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq and afterwards, the U.S. posture toward Iran became increasingly confrontational, with Washington frequently hinting at its desire to initiate “regime change” in Tehran and openly declaring that “all options are on the table” in dealing with a seemingly ever-present “Iranian threat.” This bellicose posture only helped strengthen hardline and radical elements within the Iranian regime. Writing in 2003, an observer of U.S.-Iranian relations made the following comment:

As neo-conservatives inside and outside the Pentagon step up their rhetoric against the Islamic Republic of Iran, internal polarization in Iran seems to be reaching a breaking point…. With the U.S. moving toward an explicitly more confrontational posture toward Iran, different factions within the regime, as well as outside political forces and significant segments of the population, seem to have concluded that the current deadlock must be broken — one way or another.39

The deadlock was finally broken when Iranians went to the polls two years later. Faced with choosing between a radical hardliner and a moderate conservative, and still threatened by tough rhetoric out of Washington, they opted for the former, who has since managed to match the Bush administration with a tough rhetoric of his own. The emerging conflict largely centers on “symbolic discourse,” whereby “both nations construct the ‘other’ to fit an idealized picture of an enemy.”40 But today this war of words runs the real danger of open military conflict, with catastrophic consequences for both sides.
As the Bush administration muddles through the Iraq quagmire, it continues to keep up its bellicose rhetoric toward Iran. And, by so doing, it helps fuel the factional conflict within the Iranian regime.

For the foreseeable future, since neither the internal nor external stimuli for Iranian factionalism show any signs of abating, Iranian diplomacy in general and national-security policy in particular are likely to continue exhibiting its symptoms. Political factionalism, institutional “suspended equilibrium,” and competing visions of Iran’s role in the region and in the larger world will continue to characterize the country’s foreign and national-security policies for some time to come. In the process, opportunities for improving the country’s national interests are likely to be lost, forcing Iranian leaders to scramble from one diplomatic setback to another. And, for now at least, it appears as if the United States will do its best to ensure that this scenario continues unabated.

2 In brief, “path dependence” approaches to institutional change posit that “once in place, institutions do exert a powerful influence on the strategies and calculations of — and interactions among — the actors that inhibit them.” Kathleen Thelen, How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skill in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 31. Along the same lines, James Mahoney maintains that path dependence “characterizes specifically those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties.” James Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology,” Theory and Society, Vol. 29, 2000, p. 507.
5 This point will be discussed in greater detail below. For now, it is important to note that the country’s foreign policy is seldom made with an eye toward domestic public opinion. For more on the point, see Karim Sadjadpour, “How Relevant is the Iranian Street?” The Washington Quarterly, Winter 2006-07, pp. 151-162.
6 For a concise discussion of factional politics in the 1980s and the early 1990s, see Ali Banuazizi, “Iran’s Revolutionary Impasse: Political Factionalism and Societal Resistance,” Middle East Report, No. 191, November-December 1994, pp. 2-8. Banuazizi marvels (p. 2) at how a “relatively small group of men, in spite of their many similarities in social origin and intellectual background, have disagreed on some of the most fundamental issues concerning the nature of an Islamic society and government, and have formed alliances and counter-alliances based on ideological affinities and political expediencies.”
10 Anthony Cordesman, without citing his sources, maintains that Iran has supplied the Hezbollah with the advanced al-Fajr rocket, and at one point in 2004 had some 400 members of the IRGC provide the organization with military training. See Anthony Cordesman, Iran’s Military Capabilities (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004). Though also without adequate citation, a discussion of Iran’s military assistance to the Hezbollah can be found in Patrick Devenny, “Hezbollah’s Strategic Threat to Israel,” Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 13, No. 1, Winter 2006.
11 Eric Hooglund, “Iranian Views of the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. 25, No. 1,
20 Mohsen Aminzadeh, “Iranian Foreign Policy.”
21 Ibid.
26 See, for example, excerpts from speech by Defense Minister General Mostafa Mohammad Najjar in *Resalat*, No. 6091, February 22, 2007.
27 A recent quote from Ahmadinejad is telling: “We must stand on our own feet… The West must know that the plan it has hatched for us, like all its other plans in the past, is doomed to failure. They have no other instruments except for creating havoc.” *Resalat*, No. 6076, February 4, 2007.
28 Mohsen Aminzadeh, “Iranian Foreign Policy.”
29 Ibid.
31 Ibid. p. 9. A detailed and candid account of Iran’s negotiating aims and tactics by Iran’s chief negotiator with the EU and the IAEA during the Khatami administration can be found in Hassan Rowhani, “Farasou-ye Chalesh-haye Iran va Ajans dar Parvandeh-ye Hasteh-ee” (Beyond Iran’s Difficulties with the Agency Concerning the Nuclear Issue), *GofteMan*, No. 37, Fall 2005, pp. 8-38.
32 Chubin, pp. 9-10.
33 Rowhani, op. cit. p. 11.
37 Farhi, “‘Iran’s Ahmadinejad’s Tumultuous Presidency,” p. 19.
38 Ibid.