Security for a New Century: Study Group Report

Briefing: Iranian Politics and Decision-Making

Speaker: Elliot Hen-Tov  
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Date: Friday, June 13 at 10:00 am

Location: Senate Capitol, Room S 115

Security for a New Century was honored to host Elliot Hen-Tov, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, for a discussion on the dynamics inside Iran’s political leadership. He specializes in contemporary Turkish and Iranian affairs. His article “Understanding Iran’s New Authoritarianism,” appeared in the Washington Quarterly in the winter of 2007 (http://www.twq.com/07winter/docs/07winter_hentov.pdf).

This briefing is the fourth in an ongoing series on the US and Iran that Security for a New Century has developed in partnership with the US Institute of Peace. The series aims to explore a wide range of political, economic, social and cultural issues which influence US-Iranian relations.

Javier Solana, the European Union’s foreign policy envoy, visited Tehran last week to outline a new package of incentives to Iran in exchange for suspension of its enrichment activities. The visit came amid calls from the Bush administration and some European governments for further sanctions against Tehran, if it does not halt its nuclear program. What effect, if any, do these calls have on the Iranian leadership and the population? What political currents and different interests can be detected in the Iranian leadership? What are the near and longer-term prospects for an improvement in the relationship with Iran?

Mr. Hen-Tov drew two important conclusions from his analysis of Iran’s internal political system. First, Iran’s political system is inherently opaque and diffuse, which
fosters intense factionalism. Therefore, US foreign policy must consider how any initiative will reverberate within Iran’s factional disputes. Second, US-Iranian relations are a function of the strategic balance, which has seen a dramatic weakening of the US position vis-à-vis Iran. Improving the US position should thus be paramount to any specific foreign policy, whether leading toward confrontation or rapprochement.

Iran’s constitutional system is characterized by both democratic and theocratic elements. Rather than a monolithic, small, elite leadership click, Iran has a large and diverse leadership group that is divided along factional lines. While there are disputes over political and economic policies, there is general ideological consensus that Iran should exercise its regional hegemony as the Shia leader, and it has a inalienable right to nuclear energy.

Importantly, the large elite group controls the apparatuses of government and as a result, popular opinion is relatively unimportant. Iranians have become increasingly apathetic toward politics and instead are focusing on economic development along the lines of China’s development model. In the short to medium term, Iran’s political economy has served to strengthen Ahmadinejad’s power through patronage networks, largely due to oil prices. Although Iran’s political elite are attempting to emulate the China model (authoritarianism with economic growth), macroeconomic challenges, heavy reliance on oil production, and a lack of political will have limited the effort’s effectiveness. Additionally, demographic and economic trends demonstrate that Iran has survived its baby boomer period and does not have to cope with huge numbers of youth to integrate into the labor market.

Recent developments suggest that Iran is undergoing a shift from the existing clerical theocracy to a more conventional authoritarian structure. Pressure from reformers, combined with US interventionism after 9/11, has fostered the development of an elitist security regime along the lines of traditional authoritarianism.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad represents the triumph of conservative ideological and militaristic populism. This movement threatens the oligarchs like Rafsanjani who had amassed enormous wealth and suffered financially under international sanctions. They stand to lose more if Ahmadinejad’s populist agenda is implemented. The outcome of the Ahmadinejad-Rafsanjani rivalry is crucial because Rafsanjani represents a significant threat to Ahmadinejad’s security state and a potentially enormous source of redistributable wealth that Ahmadinejad could use to further entrench his power.
The defining feature of Ahmadinejad’s administration has been the intertwining of the government decision-making with the fundamentalist revolutionary security apparatuses, leaving the conventional military relatively weak. This has fostered a confrontation between the old revolutionaries, who have recognized the limits of the revolution, and the second generation fundamentalists like Ahmadinejad, who came of age during the Iran-Iraq war and are products of the security organizations. Ahmadinejad’s supporters blame the problems in Iranian society on the failure to realize the revolutionary Islamic principles.

Given these realities of Iranian internal politics, US policy towards Iran should focus on producing fissures within the elite group and exploit the factions. Currently, the Iranian regime will not concede anything on the nuclear issue because they perceive US weakness due to military overstretch and a weak economy. High oil prices and ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan put Iran in a strong position, and US unilateral sanctions and bellicose rhetoric seem to have reached their limits in effectiveness.

Mr. Hen-Tov argues that an international consensus for sanctions aimed at producing elite factional rivalry is the only effective method of affecting Iran’s political economy. The US and Iran have common interests in achieving a secure and stable Iraq, but to date the US has been pursuing much of Iran’s interests in Iraq without cooperating with Iran. Therefore, there is common ground for any rapprochement between the US and Iran to begin with the issue of Iraq. However, leveraging Iran will require improvements in the US position vis-à-vis the strategic balance of power in the Middle East.

Security for a New Century is a bipartisan study group for Congress. Please direct any inquiries to Geneve Mantri via email geneve.mantri@luger.senate.gov or Judith Oliver via email Judith.oliver@house.mail.gov.