



Obama and Iran's 2013 elections: The role of presidents in the nuclear crisis

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- Obama inherited a very intractable legacy from George W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil' policy.
- The Iranians were not prepared for Obama's early policy of outreach and it produced few direct results, but may have helped to convince Russia and China to support more stringent sanctions.
- Obama still reaffirms his commitment to resolving the issue diplomatically.
- There is disagreement between the US and Israel over the issue of Iran's 'red lines', and the US remains ambiguous about the issue of nuclear latency.
- President Obama during his second term in office is constrained by the Republican majority in the House of Representatives.
- Whilst the new president of Iran, due to be elected on 14 June 2013, will play a role in Iranian foreign policy, it is the Supreme Leader Khamene'i who has the last word. The election is therefore unlikely to lead to a change in Iran's stance on the nuclear issue.
- The Guardian Council permitted only eight candidates to run in this year's presidential elections, banning the former President of Iran, Rafsanjani, and also a close ally of President Ahmadinejad.
- The presidential election will be little more than a run-off between ultra-conservatives aligned with the Supreme Leader. Iran's current nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili is Khamene'i's favourite.
- There will not be the same level of dissent as around the 2009 elections.
- Frustrated by disagreements with Ahmadinejad, the Supreme Leader may even rid Iran of the current presidential system of governance, thus strengthening his hold on power in Iran.

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1 Obama and the US President's role in changing relations with Iran

1.1 Obama and the legacy of the 'Axis of Evil'

The relationship between the US and the Islamic Republic of Iran is as strained today as at any given time over the past 30 years. Trita Parsi, of the National Iranian American Council, characterises the relationship as open “enmity” that “is no longer a phenomenon, it is an institution.”¹ Historic mistrust runs deep and permeates all aspects of their bilateral relations.² President Barack Obama recognised in his interview for BBC Persian in 2010 that the history is a significant obstacle but he believes that it can “be bridged with mutual understanding, [and] mutual respect.”³ His first term in office, however, did not bring the two countries any closer to a lasting resolution of the conflict.

Obama inherited a very intractable legacy from George W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil' policy. This policy, first set out in the State of the Union address in January 2002, remains a major block in relations between Washington and Tehran. Lumping Iran together with Iraq and North Korea, only weeks after a successful collaboration between the two nations at the December 2001 Bonn Conference that, among other things, set the interim constitution of the post-Taliban Afghanistan, led to a recognition in Tehran that the Bush Administration had no intention to normalise the relationship with Iran despite common interests in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The 'Hadley Rules' of conduct that informed much of the US relationship with the rogue nations allowed for some US co-operation with Iran in tactical matters but precluded any change in the strategic nature of the US relations with Tehran.⁴ This only strengthened the anti-American resolve of the ultra-conservative movement and “united Iran's disparate political factions against a common threat,” effectively leaving no space for reformers such as President Khatami.⁵ Jack Straw pointedly notes that the inclusion of Iran in the 'Axis of Evil' was a “serious error ... [that] laid the ground for the hardliners” in Tehran.⁶

1.2 Obama and the rise of Iranian ultra-conservatism

Despite this perilous state of affairs at the time of his first election, President Obama has since made more effort to reach out to Tehran than any US president since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. An early, comprehensive review of US policies on Iran set up by Obama and led by two senior US diplomats – Dennis Ross and Puneet Talwar – recommended restarting the connection with the Islamic Republic and using diplomacy and sanctions in a dual-track approach.⁷ Barack Obama seemed to have recognised the validity of Mohamed ElBaradei's statement that “Anytime you try to isolate a country, the situation gets much worse... Whether you like or dislike your enemy, you have to talk to them.”⁸

¹ Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*, 2012, p5.

² Anthony H Cordesman et al, 'U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition- The Sanctions Game: Energy, Arms Control, and Regime Change', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 6 October 2011.

³ 'In full: Obama speaks to BBC Persian', *BBC Persian*, 24 September 2010.

⁴ Stephen Hedley was the US Deputy National Security Adviser under George W. Bush. For more see: Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*, 2012, p41.

⁵ Karim Sadjadpour and George Perkovich, 'The Iranian Nuclear Threat' in *Global Ten: Challenges and Opportunities for the President*, ed. Matthews, JT, 2012, p47.

⁶ Jack Straw, 'Even if Iran gets the Bomb, it won't be worth going to war', *The Telegraph*, 25 Feb 2013.

⁷ Ali Vaez and Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran's Nuclear Odyssey: Costs and Risks*, 2013, p28. Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*, 2012, p44.

⁸ 'Iran: Ready to work with Obama', *CNN*, 30 January 2009.

Obama's inauguration speech and his subsequent *Nowruz* (Iranian New Year) message clearly exhibited a shift in Washington's outreach to Iran. Having publically recognised the Iranian regime's Islamic nature, an unprecedented development, Barack Obama reaffirmed his administration's commitment to diplomacy and extended "a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."⁹

However, the popularity of the ultra-conservative groups in Iran at the time of 2008 elections meant that Obama's policy of outreach was almost doomed from the start. Hamidreza Taraghi, a principalist¹⁰ Iranian politician said: "Our viewpoint is, the US strategy to Iran has not changed, but the tactics have changed. When the US says to open your fist, our fist has always been in defence. It is the US that has always had its fist clenched."¹¹ The Iranians were not prepared for Obama and his open-hand proposal. The almost complete lack of support for change among Tehran's ruling circles, waning support for the previous reformist policies of international engagement of President Khatami, the US' weak position in Iraq and Afghanistan at the time, meant that Obama's outreach fell on almost deaf ears in Iran.

1.3 Obama's change of heart?

All the US efforts to improve the relations with Tehran required a major re-evaluation following the events of 2009. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's fraudulent electoral success, the Supreme Leader's active role in suppressing the Green Revolution, the regime's final disclosure of a secret enrichment plant in Fordow, as well as their decision to withdraw from the fuel swap deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil, "corroded any Western inclinations for further engagement," as argued by Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution.¹²

Iran's actions led to a situation in which any of "Obama's ... attempts at détente with Iran became a political liability" and the initial policy of outreach was quickly replaced by one of estrangement and the financial and political isolation of Iran.¹³ The window of opportunity was quickly closing as the President heeded the many calls for further isolation of Iran. Most of the Republicans in Congress, Israel, and Washington's Arab allies – most notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – all called for action. The Saudi and Emirati royal families were so concerned with Iran's growing role in the region that they actually lobbied the US to "cut off the head of the snake," as we learnt from declassified US diplomatic cables.¹⁴

⁹ Karim Sadjadpour and George Perkovich, 'The Iranian Nuclear Threat' in *Global Ten: Challenges and Opportunities for the President*, ed. Matthews, JT, 2012, p46; 'Barack Obama's Inaugural Address', *The New York Times*, 20 January 2009.

¹⁰ Principalism constitutes a movement currently dominating Iran's political arena that professes an ardent and untamed loyalty to the Supreme Leader, his policies and the principle of *Velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurists). Social and political ultra-conservatism and anti-Americanism are among the fundamental precepts of this faction. The term 'principalist' is used here purposefully to draw a significant distinction within the broad conservative movement in Iran. The popular use of the term 'conservative' may in fact be misleading in the context of political life in the Islamic Republic. Even the most well known pro-reform figure in this year's elections – the former president Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani – fits squarely within the confines of conservatism in Iran. Many of the reformists, Rafsanjani included, were either the founding fathers of the Islamist regime or played a significant role in the conservative revolutionary movement. 'Principalism', therefore, is used here to distinguish between the radical ultra-conservative faction in Iranian politics and those that aim to reform the current authoritarian structures of the system, albeit retaining the Islamic nature of the regime.

¹¹ 'Iranians wary of Obama's approach', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 5 February 2009.

¹² Suzanne Maloney, 'Keeping Iran in Check: The Next President Must Focus on Achievable Goals', *Brookings Institution*, 20 September 2012, p4.

¹³ David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State*, 2012, p261.

¹⁴ Classified US State Dept cables: 07ABUDHABI187, 'Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Talks Iran Concerns with General Moseley', 2 February 2007; 08RIYADH649, 'Saudi King Abdullah and Senior Princes on Saudi Policy Toward Iraq', 20 April 2008; 08RIYADH1134, 'Saudis on Iran Ref Upcoming NAM FM Meeting', 22 July 2008.

A combination of internal struggle between Obama, his own administration, and the Republican Congress; consolidation of strength of the conservative and anti-American principalist movement in Iran; strong anti-Iranian Israel and AIPAC lobbying; and the regional calls for action from the southern shores of the Gulf led to an important change in Obama's policy towards Tehran. Although eschewing the 'Axis of Evil' rhetoric of President Bush, Obama's first-term policy framework on Iran resembled a steady continuation of Bush's second-term approach to Tehran, Maloney argues.¹⁵ This view is certainly popular among the Iranian regime, which believes that "Obama's strategy, like that of his predecessors, is to invite Iran for direct negotiations while escalating hostilities through economic warfare, covert operations and cyber attacks," as former Iranian ambassador Seyed Mousavian argues.¹⁶

Obama however outmatched his predecessor by effectively changing the international perception of the crisis that led to quite an unprecedented P5¹⁷ consensus on the matter. Following considerable efforts by Barack Obama to bring both Russia and China into the Western fold on issues of international sanctions; the international community appeared for the first time squarely united in penalising the Islamic Republic. The US administration succeeded in both cancelling the previously agreed Russian sale of S-300 long-range air defence system to Tehran, and in ensuring the Chinese compliance with the new oil sanctions regime against Iran by giving Beijing assurances that Riyadh would happily compensate for any shortfall in oil imports.¹⁸ The new sanctions regime imposed on Iran under President Obama has been the toughest and most comprehensive yet.

Although bilateral and multilateral sanctions are certainly nothing new to Iran – Tehran has been penalised for its behaviour and lack of transparency for over three decades – this latest effort in applying unprecedented pressure on the regime seems to have finally pushed the ayatollahs back to the negotiating table. The P5+1 talks may not have yet yielded much progress on the substantive matters, but the fact that Iranians now participate in talks in a 'constructive manner' is a considerable achievement in itself.

1.4 Second Obama administration – strategic ambiguity

Obama's approach to resolving Iran's nuclear crisis has not evolved in any significant way since late 2009. Although the president repeatedly stresses that "all options are on the table" (including a pre-emptive military strike – albeit as a last resort)¹⁹ and that his administration actively pursues a stringent sanctions regime, Barack Obama continues to consistently reaffirm his commitment to resolving the issue diplomatically. The carrot and stick policy (with arguably more emphasis on the stick than the carrot) continues to inform Washington's approach to Tehran.

The outlines of Washington's current policy on Iran, however, are far from being clearly defined. Ironically, this US ambiguity about the not-so-red 'red lines' resembles to a degree Iran's own policy of nuclear ambiguity and deniability. Although the administration made no clear statement about stopping Iran from achieving the nuclear weapons capability, known as

¹⁵ Suzanne Maloney, Testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security, Homeland Defense and Foreign Operations, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, paper presented at the Hearing on: Progress of the Obama Administration's Policy Toward Iran, 15 November 2011, in Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ 'What Kerry needs to know about Iran', *Financial Times*, 25 Feb 2013.

¹⁷ P5 refers to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, namely China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US.

¹⁸ Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*, 2012, pp47-48.

¹⁹ The White House, 'Remarks by President Obama and President Peres of Israel at Presentation of the Medal of Freedom', *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, 13 June 2012.

the latency stage,²⁰ it continues to express its professed goal of facilitating “a complete halt to Iranian enrichment” as Hillary and Flynt Leverett, former US National Security Council diplomats, argue.²²

The notion of US-defined ‘red lines’ that must not be crossed by Iran for fear of military action by the US has become a matter of much speculation and a clear point of contention between Washington and its allies. Nicholas Burns, the former Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs and the US Permanent Representative to NATO, has recently remarked that ‘In matters of war and peace, you generally don’t want to back yourself into a corner by drawing lines in the sand’.²³ Although his statement might not represent the current official position of the Obama administration, it portrays a long-established concern with drawing clearly defined red lines. Jaclyn Tandler of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace remarks that careful preservation of tactical ambiguity is one of the fundamental precepts of the Obama administration’s strategy on Iran.²⁴

She then elaborates:

Last week Secretary Panetta also said the administration will not tolerate “an Iran that basically spreads violence around the world, that supports terrorism, that conducts acts of violence.” Iran continues to spread violence and support terror and the administration has not responded, at least in publicly observable ways. The message conveyed is that the administration will not necessarily act on the commission of ‘intolerable acts’.²⁵

A recognition of this ambiguity was also included in the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee’s recent letter to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, in which the chairman asked Mr Hague to clarify the UK’s own position on ‘red lines’. “It would be helpful if you could set out the UK’s view on when Iran would have crossed the line of weaponisation,” writes Richard Ottaway.²⁶ The Foreign Secretary is yet to respond to this request.

1.5 Obama’s visit to Israel

The issue of Iran’s ‘red lines’ represents the clearest point of contention between the US and Israel today. Even during Obama’s inspection of the largely US-funded ‘Iron Dome’ missile battery in March 2013, the question of red lines hit the news headlines. In a short exchange with one of the IDF officers that showed Barack Obama around the facility, he was heard to

²⁰ Nuclear latency stage, also known as the ‘Japan option’, is a term commonly used to describe a state of technical prowess that allows countries, otherwise engaged in civilian nuclear power programmes, to cross the weaponisation threshold in a short period of time. In order to reach this stage, a country must master the complete nuclear fuel cycle, have advanced nuclear weapons delivery capability, and possess considerable amounts of highly enriched uranium (HEU). Although reaching a nuclear latency stage in cases of ‘rogue’ countries like Iran may be considered dangerous, and it certainly limits the international community’s capacity for pre-emptive action, this stage is not illegal under the current international law and NPT regime. It has been argued that all technologically advanced countries, such as Japan or Germany, are capable of developing nuclear weapons in relatively short periods of time.

²¹ For more information on Iran’s latency see the following Library standard note: [Is Iran developing a nuclear weapon?](#) of 15 February 2012.

²² Hillary Mann Leverett and Flynt Leverett, ‘Obama’s choice: Real diplomacy (or war) with Iran’, *Al Jazeera English*, 23 March 2013.

²³ ‘What Is a ‘Red Line’ Worth?’, *National Journal*, 2 May 2013.

²⁴ Jaclyn Tandler, ‘The Thin Red Line: Six Observations on Obama’s Iran Policy’. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 February 2012.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Letter from Richard Ottaway MP, Chairman of House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee to Rt Hon William Hague MP, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 24 April 2013.

ask: "Where do you want to start?" "We are following the red line, sir," replied the military official. "The red line, okay. He's always talking to me about red lines" remarked Obama whilst pointing at Israel's President.²⁷

Their understanding of what constitutes a 'red line' however is significantly different. The Israeli administration is very clear that Iran should not be allowed to reach a nuclear latency stage, where should it wish to weaponise it would have all the necessary capability to cross the threshold either opaquely or transparently within a short period of time. On the other hand, Washington remains resolved that reaching the nuclear latency stage is, in itself, not grave enough a threat to demand a pre-emptive military strike. "Setting the red line at a 'nuclear weapon' is very different from vowing to stop Iran from reaching a 'nuclear weapons capability'," said Haim Malka, the Deputy Director of the Middle East programme at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).²⁸ The administration's professed insistence on drawing the line at the weapons grade enrichment levels (above 90 per cent fissile concentration in ²³⁵U) arguably signals an acceptance of significant nuclear weapons capability, as noted by Tandler.²⁹

The two administrations also differ on how to deal with Iran. Days before his trip to Tel Aviv, President Obama gave an interview to the Israeli TV. He pointedly marked that it remains the US administration's assessment that Iran has not yet decided to cross a nuclear threshold and requires 'over a year or so for Iran to actually develop a nuclear weapon'.³⁰ Moreover, talking about establishing a "lasting diplomatic solution," he seems to agree with Ali Vaez and Karim Sadjadpour's latest analysis that 'the only long-term solution for assuring that Iran's nuclear program remains purely peaceful is to find a mutually agreeable diplomatic solution'.³¹

Israel however, is no longer convinced that a diplomatic solution is still achievable and says now more frequently than ever before that a preferably international military campaign to stop Iran from gaining a nuclear weapons capability may be required. These disparate understandings of 'red lines' and the tactical approach to the Iranian question are deeply imbedded in their different threat assessments. Although clearly recognising the grave dangers of nuclear-armed Iran (Obama always states his unambivalent opposition to such an eventuality) he does not seem to be entirely convinced that it would constitute an 'existential threat' to Israel. In a joint press conference with President Netanyahu, Obama stated:

We agree that a nuclear-armed Iran would be a threat to the region, a threat to the world, and potentially an existential threat to Israel. And we agree on our goal. We do not have a policy of containment when it comes to a nuclear Iran. Our policy is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. We prefer to resolve this diplomatically, and there's still time to do so.³²

The hawkish approach of Israel's administration towards Iran – although popular among some of the Republican Congressmen – is not yet accepted as entirely credible by President

²⁷ 'Obama, Netanyahu trade banter as they tread a new 'red line'', *Reuters*, 20 March 2013.

²⁸ 'Iran nuclear program: Obama makes case for diplomacy ahead of trip to Israel', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 March 2013.

²⁹ Jaclyn Tandler, 'The Thin Red Line: Six Observations on Obama's Iran Policy', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 February 2013.

³⁰ Michael D Shear and David E Sanger, 'Iran Nuclear Weapon to Take Year or More, Obama Says', *The New York Times*, 14 March 2013.

³¹ Ali Vaez and Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran's Nuclear Odyssey: Costs and Risks*, 2013, p30.

³² The White House, 'Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Conference', 20 March 2013.

Obama. This point has been made even clearer through his appointment of Chuck Hagel and John Kerry as the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State respectively. Sadjadpour argues that Obama's second-term administration is "the most pro-Iranian-engagement national security team since 1979."³³ Mark Fitzpatrick of the International Institute for Strategic Studies also confirms that the use of pre-emptive military force will be ultimately the US administration's 'last option'.³⁴

Nevertheless, the administration has limited ability to significantly change the current policy of estrangement and unilateral sanctions against the Iranian regime. This has become even more transparent following the most recent developments within the US Senate and its Foreign Relations Committee. Resolution 65 passed unanimously by the Senate on 22nd May 2013 urges the President to offer substantial support to any future Israeli pre-emptive strike against Iran. Although this resolution is in no way binding on the administration, it clearly indicates the Senate's position vis-à-vis Iran.

Congress ... urges that, if the Government of Israel is compelled to take military action in legitimate self-defense against Iran's nuclear weapons program, the United States Government should stand with Israel and provide, in accordance with United States law and the constitutional responsibility of Congress to authorize the use of military force, diplomatic, military, and economic support to the Government of Israel in its defense of its territory, people, and existence.³⁵

2 2013 Presidential elections in Iran – a watershed or continued stalemate?

President Obama's role in the nuclear crisis negotiations and any future final resolution of the stalemate should not be underestimated. On the other hand, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's actions in the last eight years of international impasse certainly exacerbated the situation but, as merely a head of government and not a head of state in Iran, his impact remains limited.

Whilst the new president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, due to be elected on 14 June 2013, will play a significant role in both internal and foreign politics of Iran, it is the Supreme Leader (the *Rahbar*) Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamene'i who constitutes the final decision-maker in Tehran. According to the constitution of the Islamic Republic, the president is "the highest state official after the Supreme Leader," charged with both devising and implementing domestic and foreign policies of Iran.³⁶ Nevertheless, the outcome of next month's elections is likely to indicate Iran's future course of action and its role in resolving the international crisis.

Next month, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will dismantle his administration after two terms (eight years) in office. It is indeed his relationship with the Supreme Leader that is widely expected to dictate this year's electoral dynamics. 2013, recently described by Khamene'i as an "epic

³³ Karim Sadjadpour, 'The Presidential Inbox: Iran's Nuclear Program', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 7 March 2013.

³⁴ Mark Fitzpatrick, 'US Foreign Policy Prospects – Handling Iran will be the Key', *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 31 January 2013.

³⁵ US Senate, Resolution 65- 113th Congress (2013-2014): **A resolution strongly supporting the full implementation of United States and international sanctions on Iran and urging the President to continue to strengthen enforcement of sanctions legislation**, 22 May 2013.

³⁶ Enis Erdem Aydın, 'A Separation?: The Principalist Divide and the Parliamentary Elections in Iran', *Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation*, February 2012.

political and economic year,”³⁷ will yet again exhibit the typical clash of “contradictory aspects of [the revolutionary] political system” – democracy entangled with theocracy.³⁸ Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani argued in June 2009: “The title of Islamic Republic is not used as a formality. It includes both the republican and Islamic nature.”³⁹ This year, however, the ‘republican’ part of Iran’s identity is both much weaker and entirely dependent on the ‘Islamic’.

Ever since the time of Iran’s first post-revolutionary president, Abol-Hassan Bani Sadr (now in exile in France), the seemingly republican and democratic structures of the directly-elected executive remain in constant, yet carefully controlled, clash with the application of the *Velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists) and the idea of God’s sole sovereignty.⁴⁰ It is indeed since the impeachment of Bani Sadr by Imam Khomeini in 1981 that the powers of the Commander-in-Chief have been usurped by the Supreme Leader.⁴¹

Khamene’i maintains a very close control of the political appointments system. Although theoretically presidential elections in Iran should be free, transparent and direct, the Supreme Leader’s influence over the Guardian Council’s⁴² vetting of the 686 registered candidates amounts to clear ‘engineering’ of the result. This process has always been used to align the office of president with the policy objectives of the Supreme Leader. Historically, however, the electoral interference was never as flagrant as during the 2009 elections. This year’s election will probably be like 2009’s or even more.

The people of Iran have been now warned by Mohammed Emami-Kashani, Tehran’s interim Friday Prayers leader, that in this vital electoral year: “the nation [is] surrounded by the enemy. The enemy wants to keep the society tempestuous and agitated.”⁴³ In the face of this external threat, the argument goes, the nation must be united in their choice, it must fulfil their religious duty of voting in presidential elections and refrain from repeating the ‘mistakes’ of 2009 Green Revolution.

This time round, the Supreme Leader has indicated that he will not allow further internal turmoil and has already announced that three new police forces and special units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah*) will be at his disposal at the time of elections to dispel any signs of dissent. He has also warned that disagreeing with the final decision of the Guardian Council amounts to a capital crime and will be treated as such. “Anyone who says the Council’s vote is illegitimate is *mofased* [corrupt on earth],” according to Khamene’i.⁴⁴ The Supreme Leader’s message to the nation is clear: no repetition of the 2009 uprisings and no

³⁷ ‘Iran reformists urged to run in election’, *The Financial Times*, 19 April 2013.

³⁸ Abbas Milani, ‘The Ayatollah in His Labyrinth’, *Foreign Policy*, 4 April 2013.

³⁹ Alireza Nader, David E Thaler and S R Bohandy, *The Next Supreme Leader: Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 2011, p53.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Nikki R. Keddie. 2006. ‘Politics and Economics under Khomeini: 1979-1989’, in *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, pp.252-253.

⁴² The Guardian Council of the Constitution (*Shora-ye Negahban-e Qanun-e Assasi*) is an extremely influential 12-strong panel of six experts in Islamic law (*faqih*s) appointed by the Supreme Leader, and six other jurists with expertise in various branches of law elected to the Council by the *Majles* (Parliament). According to Iran’s constitution, the Guardian Council is vested with wide-ranging powers of electoral oversight and the ‘duty’ to vet all candidates to the office of President, the Parliament, or the Assembly of Experts (responsible for electing and removing the Supreme Leader). Additionally, the Council acts as a *de facto* constitutional court of Iran and as the final decision maker in the process of legislating all new laws, effectively deeming the Parliament entirely dependent on the Council’s approval.

⁴³ National Council of Resistance of Iran, ‘Not voting in June election is ‘a sin’, Iranians warned’, 6 April 2013.

⁴⁴ *FARS News Agency*, 20 May 2013.

major shift in policies is permitted this year – which bodes ill for any progress on the nuclear crisis.

Historically, the results of presidential elections in Iran have been surprising to many Western analysts and Iranians alike. Speculating at this stage the result of this year's election would be a major mistake. The person to fill the office of president of the Islamic Republic is still anybody's guess. However, three aspects of this year's elections are clear:

- in the absence of a strong support for a reformist opposition, the main competition will revolve around the internal struggle between various factions of Iran's conservative (principalist) movement
- a struggle between the Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad together with his appointed successor may yet influence the outcome of the elections
- a repetition of the 2009 Green Revolution is improbable.

This prediction is supported by the results of last year's elections to the *Majles*, or parliament, where Khamene'i's position was strengthened to President Ahmadinejad's cost, in a contest run mostly between the conservative factions of Iranian politics. Parliamentary elections in Iran have historically served as a barometer of public opinion ahead of the presidential ballot.

2.1 The Supreme Leader - the 'ultimate arbiter' of all matters political

"Election rivalries must be kept within the confines of Iran's ruling system (*nezam*)," said Khamene'i earlier this year.⁴⁵ This statement clearly indicates that the *Rahbar* not only intends to play a key role in this vote but that he is also set to engineer the whole process according to the long-established concept of political expediency or public interest (*maslahat*).

The concepts of *nezam* and *maslahat* are deeply entrenched in Iran's political psyche and have been devised to compliment one another. In a truly unprecedented way for Islamic politics, the interest of the state was recognised by Imam Khomeini as the ultimate rule of action in the Islamic Republic. "Our government has priority over all other Islamic tenets, even over prayer, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca," explained Khomeini.⁴⁶ Nothing is more sacred in Iran than the continuation of his style of Islamic regime.

This rule of political expedience is likely to influence Khamene'i's decisions regarding the 2013 elections. His decision that only a very small number of candidates closely aligned with him may participate in elections due to the unprecedented economic and security situation the country faces, does not constitute a major diversion from previous practice.

In fact, Khamene'i has suggested on at least two occasions that, should it be in the long-term interest of the regime and "If deemed appropriate, Iran could [even] do without a president."⁴⁷ He seems, at least theoretically, prepared to replace the current presidential system of governance with a form of a parliamentary system, whereby the executive would not be chosen in a presidential election but instead appointed by the members of the *Majles*. Given his strong support in the current Parliament, this system would allow Khamene'i much

⁴⁵ 'Iran's supreme leader launches special website with election tips', *The Telegraph*, 19 Apr 2013.

⁴⁶ Ruhollah Khomeini cited in Fouad Ajami, 'Iran: The Impossible Revolution', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 67, No 2, 1988, 135-155.

⁴⁷ Sara Bazoobandi, 'The 2013 Presidential Elections in Iran', *Insight 88*, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 2013.

greater leverage over appointing the executive. It has also been implied that on the basis of state expediency he may wish to delay indefinitely the coming elections and instead institute an interim executive assembly. Both developments are rather unlikely to materialise this year. Having said that, the internal politics of Iran are hugely unpredictable.

Both courses of action would be motivated by the fact that most presidents of Ayatollah Khamene'i's 24-year rule have been inadequately malleable to the Supreme Leader, as argued recently by Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, a very close confidant of Khamene'i.⁴⁸ The Leader's message this year is abundantly clear as noted by Hooman Majd: "whatever internal squabbles or internecine rivalry may exist among the political elite, he will no longer tolerate any direct challenges to his supreme authority."⁴⁹

The elimination of the office, although unlikely in the current political atmosphere with the West watching Tehran for any signs of internal conflict, would follow the suit of his 1989 decision to abolish the positions of deputy Supreme Leader and the Prime Minister. The ultra-conservative followers of the Supreme Leader that will undoubtedly take centre stage in this year's elections seem more and more supportive of the idea. Securing a president favourable to Khamene'i for the next eight years in office may be even aimed at slowly bringing about this constitutional change. This move would finally crystallise the so far tentative totalitarian rule of the *Rahbar* in Iran. "Any type of pretence, or veneer of democracy or people having choices will be gone and it will truly be a one-man dictatorship," Trita Parsi told Al Jazeera in a recent interview.⁵⁰

Come June 2013, Khamene'i is set to strengthen his hold on power in the country and essentially bring to a long-awaited end the rather embarrassing political infighting between himself and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Italy's ambassador to Tehran at the time of previous presidential elections recently told the Guardian that:

This time the complexities and contradictions are really wild. The supreme leader wants a subservient and disciplined sidekick but he also needs a president to solve some very delicate problems. The supreme leader had a very bad surprise with Ahmadinejad. He thought he would be his altar boy but it turned out that Ahmadinejad wanted to be the priest.⁵¹

This is perhaps even more important now than ever as the *Rahbar* is increasingly aware of his ill health and the yet unresolved question of his succession. Although some have indicated that following Khamene'i's death Iran may turn into a military dictatorship with Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps effectively pulling all the strings, it remains clear that for now he wishes to pass the baton of power to either his son Mojtaba Khamene'i or one of his closest allies.⁵² The Supreme Leader is conscious of the fact that he must secure both the support of the Parliament and the Executive to ensure his designed succession plan. A strong president with significantly different views on the economy, security, and foreign affairs would be a clear threat to his supremacy.

⁴⁸ Abbas Milani, 'The Ayatollah in His Labyrinth', *Foreign Policy*, 4 April 2013.

⁴⁹ Hooman Majd, 'Iran's Democracy of Small Differences: Why, Despite Everything, Iranians Are Still Excited to Vote', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 May 2013.

⁵⁰ "Analysis: Reformer candidate Rafsanjani disqualified", *Al Jazeera English*, 22 May 2013.

⁵¹ 'Iran Prepares for High-Stakes Presidential Election' *The Guardian*, 13 May 2013.

⁵² Mehdi Khalaji, Karim Sadjadpour and Dennis Ross, 'Who Will Lead Post-Khamenei Iran?', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 15 February 2012.

2.2 Saeed Jalili – the Supreme Leader’s favourite?

The Supreme Leader is poised for decisive support for the more ultra-conservative politicians. First among them is the current Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and the country’s nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili. He was also the Deputy Foreign Minister for European and American Affairs during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s first term in office. Ali Ansari has recently spoken of him as Iran’s “Mr Austerity, he is quite a puritan”.⁵³

Jalili, even despite his obvious lack of executive background and considerable political inexperience, is considered by some a favourite candidate of the Supreme Leader and is certainly the most closely aligned with and influenced by Khamene’i. One of Jalili’s main electoral slogans refers to the country’s resistance as a driver of the nation’s progress. It has been argued that he might be even keen to continue under the current international sanctions regime as a way of reorienting Iranian economy and making it more self-sufficient. Majd argues, “it appears that his view on sanctions is that in the long run they help Iran.”⁵⁴ Sir Richard Dalton maintains that his ideological support for the *status quo* comes even at the cost of “connecting with voters’ fears about the future,” which is likely to decrease his popular following.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, he considers himself to be part of ‘People+1 Coalition’, distinguishing himself from the other principalist candidates of the ‘2+1 Coalition’ of Gholamali Haddad-Adel, Ali Akbar Velayati and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf – all approved by the Guardian Council to run.

Saeed Jalili is certainly not new to the process of international negotiations and the nuclear crisis. For him, the key issue is achieving a state of ‘mutual respect’ between the nations involved; ‘international justice’ is a precondition to any progress. The idea is that Iran is unfairly penalised by the international community and that this situation must be changed if the West wants to resolve the conflict. Jalili also points out that some 850 cancer patients in Iran have so far been treated with medical isotopes derived from the 20% enriched uranium and that the country is not prepared to compromise on the issue. Such statements represent a continuation of the Supreme Leader’s strategic rhetoric, and his electoral success would be unlikely to institute a major shift in negotiations. In fact, it is almost certain that Saeed Jalili would be a literal allied executor of the Supreme Leader’s position.

Moreover, on matters of international security, he announced on his official Twitter account that Iran under his presidency would be ready to “expand all-out strategic cooperation with Iraq,” and would urge Syria to resolve the current impasse through ‘democracy’, as reportedly he told Kofi Annan.⁵⁶ He also referred to the regional Sunni nations’ support for the rebel movement and compared it with Benazir Bhutto’s statements on Pakistan’s role in training the Taliban groups in Afghanistan: “We trained terrorist groups but at the end they turned to a disaster for us.”⁵⁷ His opposition to the rebel groups’ hold on power in Syria is clear.

⁵³ Ali Ansari, 'Iran's 2013 Presidential Candidates: Change Ahead?', RUSI, 30 May 2013.

⁵⁴ Hooman Majd, 'Iran's Democracy of Small Differences: Why, Despite Everything, Iranians Are Still Excited to Vote', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 May 2013.

⁵⁵ Richard Dalton, 'Iran Election: Popular Choice or Coronation?', *Chatham House Expert Comment*, 23 May 2013.

⁵⁶ 'Iran Ready to Expand All-out Strategic Cooperation with Iraq: Jalili', *Press TV*, 9 May 2013.

⁵⁷ [Dr Saeed Jalili's official Twitter account](#), 13 May 2013.

2.3 The Principalist⁵⁸ Troika

Haddad-Adel of the '2+1 Coalition' is a politician strongly committed to the doctrine of *velayat madari* – total obedience to the *Rahbar*. As a former parliamentary speaker and a father-in-law to Ali Khamene'i's eldest son, he markets himself as someone extremely close to the Supreme Leader. Moreover, despite his faction's initial support for Ahmadinejad and their effective coalition during the President's first term, the neo-principalists are now in clear opposition to the government officials' current. In fact, the hard-line conservative faction of neo-principalists opposes to a certain degree all other political groups in Iran.

The other two in the troika come from the moderate pragmatic principalist camp. Whilst perceptibly less radical than Haddad-Adel, both candidates – Ali Akbar Velayati and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf – share an orthodox understanding of the *Velayat-e faqih* principle and the supremacy of the *Rahbar*. The moderate principalist movement they represent is united by their belief in economic liberalism and resentment to overly radical ideology. Velayati, Iran's former foreign minister is accepted by the Supreme Leader as one of his most senior experts on foreign affairs, whereas Qalibaf, a very charismatic present-day mayor of Tehran (the same position as Ahmadinejad's prior to his electoral victory in 2005) and a former chief of police is seen as a very effective manager with considerable expertise in economy and internal security. He is also regarded to be a socially moderate conservative, who is keen to rather focus his attention on the currently failing economy and potentially improving the country's financial and economic ties with foreign countries.

Velayati announced that the troika, or '2+1 Coalition' as they have recently come to be known, would not compete with one another and would soon announce a common candidate for the presidency. He suggested that they have agreed to form a cabinet together.⁵⁹

It is therefore, widely expected that the elections will essentially represent a contest between Saeed Jalili and Ali Akbar Velayati; albeit with the former being a preferred option for the Supreme Leader, as argued by Sadegh Zibakalam – a professor at Tehran University.⁶⁰ For the moment, however, all three are on the list of registered and accepted candidates.

Ali Akbar Velayati; apart from being a fellow moderate principalist; shares with Mohsen Rezai – the fifth approved candidate – a rather troubled past. Both are widely suspected of orchestrating the terrorist attack on the Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1994. Rezai, the head of *the* Revolutionary Guards at the time, and Velayati, the then foreign minister, are accused of directing Hizb'Allah in perpetrating the crime. Rezai, in the unlikely event that he wins the election, would be in fact prevented from international travel due to a standing international arrest warrant on him. Although not convicted of any of the crimes, Rezai drew considerable international attention following his son's 1999 public recognition of the role Rezai played in the Buenos Aires bombing, and his son's subsequent mysterious death in Dubai in 2011.

2.4 Ahmadinejad-Mashaei: a 'Putin-Medvedev duet' may not be repeated after all

President Ahmadinejad's political standing in Iran suffered irreparable damage following his continuous overt opposition to the dominance of the Supreme Leader. He set himself on a clear collision path with the Leader on a number of occasions: (1) by appointing Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei as the President's chief of staff following the controversial 2009 elections, in

⁵⁸ For more on the meaning of the term 'principalist' see note 10, p4.

⁵⁹ Abbas Milani, 'The Ayatollah in His Labyrinth', *Foreign Policy*, 4 April 2013.

⁶⁰ Sadegh Zibakalam, 'Iranian Politics: Who Is Pulling the Strings?', *Al Jazeera English*, 23 May 2013.

defiance of Khamene'i's advice; (2) by dismissing, albeit only temporarily, his own intelligence minister, Heyder Moslehi, widely seen as a close confidant of Khamene'i; and (3) by announcing his preparedness to engage with the US in a process of direct negotiations despite the *Rahbar's* explicit rejection of such a possibility. Ahmadinejad's effective isolation from the Supreme Leader, which only increased during the past year, disabled him politically. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been a 'lame duck' president for a good part of the past two years.

Mashaei and the government's 'deviant current' (*jaryan-e enherafi*), as it is now commonly referred to by both the principalists and the Supreme Leader, have been internally vilified for their millenarian and nationalist ideology. Their concept of the government as legitimate representatives of the *Mahdi*⁶¹ is considered sacrilegious by the radical conservative clerics. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has even recently relayed his views to the members of Iran's diplomatic service and instructed them to act as the 'envoys of the *Mahdi*'.⁶² The notion is irreconcilable with the constitutional doctrine of the *Rahbar* as the sole representative of the *Mahdi* on earth under the system of *Velayat-e faqih*, and hence a clear encroachment on the domain and powers of the final juror – the Supreme Leader.⁶³

Having previously served as the First Vice President of Iran and subsequently the Chief of Staff in President Ahmadinejad's office, Mashaei is now presiding over Iran's mission to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). In these roles he has been perfectly placed to expound his view of Iran's international affairs. His remarks have annoyed many in Iran's conservative camp, mostly due to his more pragmatic and less anti-Western approach to Iran's external affairs and his strongly nationalist policies. He is known to have claimed in 2008 that "no nation in the world is our enemy" and that the Iranian people have no major problem with the 'Zionist regime' – Israel.⁶⁴ The clerical authorities subsequently vilified him as a "freemason" and a "foreign spy," and his comments on the current political system in Iran were considered tantamount to "crime against national security" by Iran's Joint Chief of Staff of the Islamic Republic.⁶⁵

Ahmadinejad, barred by the country's constitution from running for the third presidential term, aimed to continue his active role in the executive branch of government through his closely connected ally, Mashaei. Similarly to the Khamene'i-Haddad-Adel connection, Mashaei's daughter is married to Ahmadinejad's eldest son.⁶⁶ This situation is far from being coincidental and exemplifies a strong tradition of nepotism and familial links at the very top of Iranian political establishment. Iran's politics are now almost dominated by clan-like

⁶¹ According to Shia theology, the term *Mahdi* – otherwise known as the 'hidden *Imam*' or '*Imam* of the time' – refers to Islam's twelfth Imam - Mohammed al Mahdi. Shias believe that *Mahdi* will return from occultation several years before the Day of Judgement and will constitute the mankind's ultimate saviour. *Mahdi* is expected to be assisted by the return of *Isa* (Jesus), and the two are believed to fulfil God's will to eventually guide the humankind to the 'Straight Path' described in the Qur'an.

⁶² 'Iran's multiplicity of messiahs: You're a fake', *The Economist*, 27 April 2013.

⁶³ For more information on political hostilities between Khamene'i and Ahmadinejad see the following Library standard note: '*Power struggle in Iran*' of 28 July 2011.

⁶⁴ 'Ahmadinejad's ally could pose new challenge to Iran's ruling clergy', *The Guardian*, 23 Apr 2013.

⁶⁵ 'Iran Forces' Chief of Staff Criticizes Ahmadinejad Aide Over Islam Remarks', *Bloomberg*, 10 August 2010.

⁶⁶ 'Ahmadinejad's ally could pose new challenge to Iran's ruling clergy', *The Guardian*, 23 Apr 2013.

groupings, where powerful families – the Larijanis⁶⁷ are another example – control many of the country's most important positions.

52-year-old Mashaei; often referred to as 'the octopus' – he held some 14 jobs in President Ahmadinejad's administration – registered his name on the electoral list only half an hour before the deadline. This was certainly a dramatic development for Ali Khamene'i, who believes in Ahmadinejad's efforts to stage a Putin-Medvedev power duet and exchange the office of presidency among themselves.⁶⁸ Ahmadinejad's presence at the registration facility and his clear endorsement of his long-time ally constituted a clear violation of Iran's electoral law. Should he be charged by the state's prosecutor, he could face up to six months in prison and 74 lashes.⁶⁹ Ahmadinejad was clearly preparing to mount a major challenge to the status and powers of the Supreme Leader during this election and many have also speculated that he might use state funds to support Mashaei's campaign. Mashaei was, however, not permitted by the Council to run.

Although this was not an unexpected development, the story of Mashaei might not be finished yet. Reza Marashi, research director of the National Iranian American Council, described Ahmadinejad as a politician not willing "to go down without a fight — here's a guy putting at least some of the regime's dirty laundry out."⁷⁰ So far we have not really heard much of a response from Mahmud Ahmadinejad. This is believed to be due to his attempts to perhaps strike a deal with the Supreme Leader for Mashaei's eventual reinstatement to the pool of candidates.

Following Ahmadinejad's public accusation of the Larijanis of corruption, he is expected by some to reveal some inconvenient truths about the Supreme Leader and his family. In a characteristically controversial move in Iran's Parliament in February 2013, Ahmadinejad played a recording of a conversation between Saeed Mortazavi (Tehran's former prosecutor accused of links to the deaths of prisoners during the 2009 Green Revolution) and Fazel Larijani, who allegedly offered his family's political influence in exchange for financial gains.⁷¹ Despite this type of threats the Supreme Leader, Khamene'i is unlikely to concede to his demands and allow Mashaei to re-enter the race.

2.5 Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani – the (former) President of Iran?

With just minutes left to the end of the registration process, an unexpected candidate signed himself up for this year's elections - Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. At the age of 78, he is by far the oldest presidential contender, a politician with strong revolutionary credentials, and plenty of experience in the office of the President – he served as the 4th President of the Republic between 1989 and 1997.

By the time of Imam Khomeini's death in June 1989, Rafsanjani was considered one of the two most powerful and trusted lieutenants of the father of the Islamic Revolution – the other was Ali Khamene'i. He was also instrumental in Khamene'i's election to the post of the Supreme Leader, claiming to the Assembly of Experts that Khomeini informed him that Ali

⁶⁷ Ali Larijani, currently the Speaker of Iran's Majles, is a former nuclear negotiator with the West. He is himself a potential candidate in the upcoming elections. His brother, Sadegh Larijani, presides over Iran's Judiciary, whereas his other brother Mohammad Javad Larijani, controls Iran's Human Rights Commission. The Larijani family is considered extremely influential in Iran's political life.

⁶⁸ Abbas Milani, 'The Ayatollah in His Labyrinth', *Foreign Policy*, 4 April 2013.

⁶⁹ 'Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Could Face 74 Lashes over Iran Election 'Violation'', *The Telegraph*, 12 May 2013.

⁷⁰ Ian Johnston, 'Analysis: Iran's Ahmadinejad Will Fight 'Like Scarface' for His Political Future', *NBC News*, 11 February 2013.

⁷¹ 'Ahmadinejad Accuses Iran Speaker's Family of Corruption', *Reuters*, 3 February 2013.

Khamene'i should be his successor. Having been a much stronger political figure than Khamene'i at the time, Rafsanjani hoped to enter the new power race in Tehran as the dominant partner in the ruling diarchy of post-Khomeini Iran.⁷² To his great disappointment, Khamene'i's quickly growing links with the Revolutionary Guards soon changed the power balance in Iran and Rafsanjani emerged as the loser in this game, with Khamene'i securing his post for decades to come.

Rafsanjani's entry to this year's race is therefore particularly troubling to the Supreme Leader. Although officially a centrist politician, he is closely associated with the reformist movement in Tehran. In fact, after his support for parts of the Green Revolution of 2009, Rafsanjani was prevented from leading the main Friday prayers in Tehran.⁷³ Hossein Marashi, cousin of Rafsanjani's wife and a strong supporter of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, one of the Leaders of the Green Revolution, announced recently that Rafsanjani would "improve reformists' relations with the ruling regime and replace radicalism with reform."⁷⁴

Moreover, he has very strong credentials as a predominantly pragmatic leader that managed to steer Iran into the era of international accommodation of early 1990s.⁷⁵ It was during his presidency that the idea of spreading the revolution across the Islamic world and elsewhere was finally shelved. Although his term in office was characterised by considerable warming of Iran's relations with the Arab partners in the region, he did not succeed in securing a major change in the strategic competition and hostile relationship with the West. Rafsanjani is also a strong supporter of Iran's nuclear programme, which he says is purely civilian.⁷⁶

Rafsanjani's entry into the race would have almost certainly increased the turnout and strengthened the perception that Iran was offering a real choice to voters, so the Council's decision to ban his entry was met with shock and disbelief by many in Iran, both conservative and reformist.⁷⁷ Professor Juan Cole of Michigan University described it bluntly, yet correctly, as a "further step toward authoritarianism and perhaps totalitarianism in Iran. Now, the ideological litmus test for office is becoming increasingly narrow and the regime seems determined to prevent surprises, even if it means ballot-stuffing."⁷⁸

It was suggested quite early on in the race that candidates above the age of 75 would not be permitted, in line with last year's Parliament legislative proposal. However, it has since become clear that the jurists of the Guardian Council disputed this recommendation and no such rule exists under current Iranian law, as argued by Professor Sadegh Zibakalam of Tehran University.⁷⁹ In view of this, some MPs have even accused the Council of 'political action'. A conservative MP, Ali Motahhari, argues:

The Guardian Council's approach is political rather than legal or ideological ... they have provided two reasons for the disqualification of Mr Hashemi [Rafsanjani], both of which are unsubstantiated. The first one is the lack of

⁷² Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under His Successors*, 2009, p37.

⁷³ 'Iran reformists urged to run in election', *The Financial Times*, 19 April 2013.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'Iran's International Relations: Pragmatism in a Revolutionary Bottle', *The Middle East Institute Viewpoints: The Iranian Revolution at 30*, 2009.

⁷⁶ Center for Strategic Research, 'Rafsanjani Reassures West Iran Not after a-Bomb', Tehran, 24 February 2007.

⁷⁷ Farideh Farhi, 'Shifting Alliances in Iran', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 23 May 2013.

⁷⁸ Juan Cole, 'Rafsanjani's Exclusion from Iran's Presidential Race a Sign of Creeping Totalitarianism', 23 May 2013.

⁷⁹ Sadegh Zibakalam, 'Iranian Politics: Who Is Pulling the Strings?', *Al Jazeera English*, 23 May 2013.

physical fitness, and the second one is that he played a role in the 88 seditious [unrest after the 2009 elections].⁸⁰

The Council's choices may have dismayed many across the country but it is absolutely clear that their decision about Rafsanjani will not create the same level of dissent as was seen during the 2009 elections. In fact one must remember that, as in the case of Mashaei, the final decision is in the hands of Khamene'i himself. Hooman Majd suggested "It is still possible, if unlikely, that Khamenei will eventually choose to portray himself as the true saviour of Iranian democracy by overruling the Guardian Council and insisting that Rafsanjani be allowed to run."⁸¹

Rafsanjani's longstanding position in the Islamic establishment was also as much a disadvantage as an advantage when it comes to the more reform-minded, young and liberal electorate. Very few of them are politically active today, whilst the vast majority of the younger generation of Iranians is now overwhelmingly apathetic. They have lost both their interest in politics and trust in the ruling system. Feelings of disillusionment and powerlessness are widespread. Many young Iranians are even unlikely to vote. "We trusted Khatami, but he was one of them and did not stand for us. Rafsanjani, Mashaei and the rest [of the conservatives] are all supporters and beneficiaries of the current corrupt and theocratic regime," said a young student at the University of Tehran interviewed by Majid Rafizadeh of the International American Council on the Middle East.⁸² Similar views abound across the country.

Rafsanjani appeared to be one of the international community's preferred candidates. With strong historical record of less ideologically driven policy-making he was expected to lead Iran closer to the negotiating table. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to remember that, even if he had won the election, his role in negotiations would have been hugely constrained by the powerful Khamene'i and his ultra-loyal Revolutionary Guard Corps. Finally, Rafsanjani is certainly not a politician that would be prepared to lobby the Leader to heed the Western calls for the end to the enrichment process.

2.6 Reformists and the Green Movement

The fraudulent presidential elections of 2009 that returned Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to his Presidential office for the second term led to an almost complete destruction of the moderately pro-Western Green Movement. Both of the leaders of this political current - Mir Hossein Mousavi (together with his wife) and Mehdi Karroubi, remain under house arrest. Many of their supporters have been forced into exile. Some continue to suffer in Iran's prisons, especially in Tehran's Evin Prison, known for torture and degrading, inhumane treatment of inmates. "The crushing of the Green Movement in 2009 effectively banished real reform ideology from the country's political vocabulary," Hooman Majd notes in *Foreign Affairs*.⁸³ The Green Movement is now completely outside the political establishment in Iran and will play no role in this election.⁸⁴ This exclusion is only strengthened by a strong tendency to apathy and disillusionment with the political process following the 2009 elections.

⁸⁰ 'Iranian MP Says Vetting Body's Move 'Politically Driven'', *Mehr News Agency*, 22 May 2013.

⁸¹ Hooman Majd, 'Iran's Democracy of Small Differences: Why, Despite Everything, Iranians Are Still Excited to Vote', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 May 2013.

⁸² Majid Rafizadeh, 'Iran's presidential candidates offer no hope for change', *The National*, 24 May 2013.

⁸³ Hooman Majd, 'Iran's Democracy of Small Differences: Why, Despite Everything, Iranians Are Still Excited to Vote', *Foreign Affairs*, 22 May 2013.

⁸⁴ 'Iran Election Watch 2013: A look at the main political currents', *The International*, 23 January 2013.

There are, however, two presidential candidates that represent the more moderate reformist wing – the former 2003-2005 nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani, and a university professor and former First Vice President in the administration of Mohammed Khatami – Mohammad Reza Aref. It is however only Aref that is publicly very outspoken about his reformist agenda; Rouhani although leaning towards a pro-reform ideology should rather be classified as a centrist politician.

Hassan Rouhani, a moderate Islamic cleric, has continued to be credited with some confidence from the Supreme Leader and has been a member of the Supreme National Security Council since 1989. As a person responsible for the nuclear brief he played an important role in Iran's decision to sign the Additional Protocol that allowed for much greater inspection of Iran's nuclear programme after 2003.

He has recently called for a new “constructive interaction with the world” and Iran's final resolution of the outstanding issues related to the nuclear programme.⁸⁵ Rouhani has reportedly stated: “My government will be one of prudence and hope, and my message is about saving the economy, reviving ethics and interaction with the world.”⁸⁶ His presidency, although limited in terms of decision-making concerning the resolution of the nuclear crisis, would be likely to bring at least a change in the style and tone of Iran's negotiations with the P5+1.

Although, out of the currently approved eight candidates, he would certainly be a preferred choice for many in the West given his pragmatism and anti-Ahmadinejad stance, he enjoys little support at home and has received little public attention in Iran over the years. Nevertheless, following the Guardian Council's decision to ban Rafsanjani from running in this year's contest, the former president – often referred to in Iran as ‘the Shark’ – seems to have endorsed Rouhani's effort and has encouraged him to “stand strong” in the face of the strong opposition from the principalist candidates.⁸⁷

Mohammad Reza Aref, as the country's only openly reformist candidate, appears to have received the Council's approval on the basis of his relative lack of charisma and popularity. He is almost unheard of outside Tehran and is very unlikely to gather much popular vote this year. It is also worth noting that both Rouhani and Aref are unlikely to receive much attention in the media and their campaigns will probably not get televised.⁸⁸

The June 2013 race is unlikely to have much impact on the international negotiations. The contest can now be expected to be more a race of principalists for the Leader's vote rather than that of the people, Trita Parsi suggests.⁸⁹ None of the candidates from across the current political spectrum in Iran is prepared to compromise greatly on nuclear enrichment. Moreover, most of them share a sentiment that the international community must deal with Iran on the basis of “mutual respect” and recognition of Iran's strategic position in the region. These may not be preconditions to talks but will surely be fundamental to any final resolution of all the outstanding issues and the crisis in general.

⁸⁵ 'Ahmadinejad looks to make confidant his successor as Iran race starts', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2013.

⁸⁶ 'Former Nuclear Negotiator Joins Iranian Presidential Race', *Al Monitor*, 11 April 2013.

⁸⁷ Hassan Rouhani's official Twitter account, 23 May 2013.

⁸⁸ Farideh Farhi, 'Shifting Alliances in Iran', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 23 May 2013.

⁸⁹ 'Analysis: Reformer Candidate Rafsanjani Disqualified', *Al Jazeera English*, 22 May 2013.