

NEW VOICES IN PUBLIC POLICY

Volume V
Winter 2010/2011

The Outcomes of Iranian Civil Unrest Over the Next Four Years

Solaiman Afzal



School of Public Policy

ISSN: 1947-2633

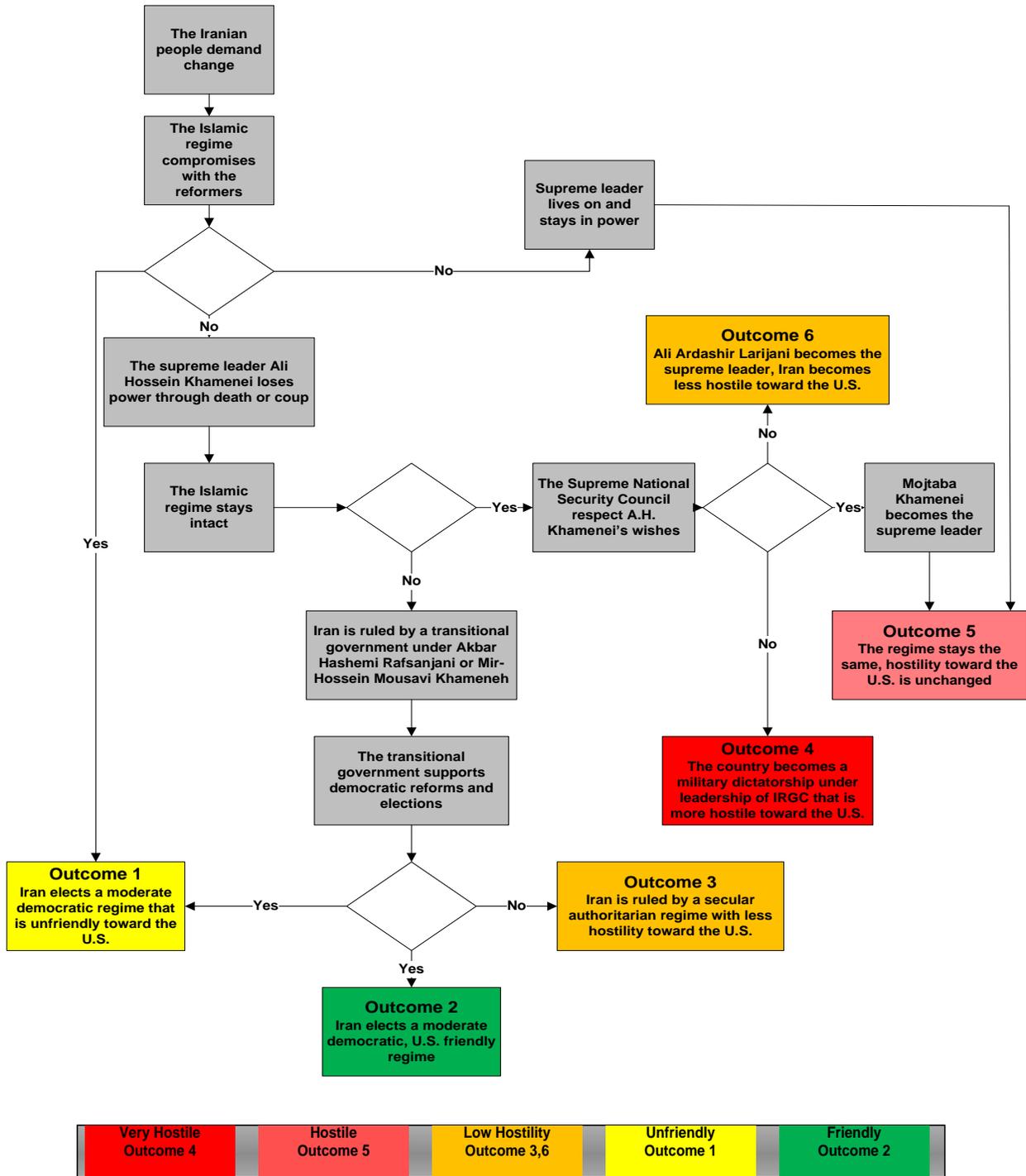
The tainted June 2009 Iranian presidential election and the regime's violent response to a mostly peaceful protest thereafter provided the Iranian people with a rationale to openly challenge an already unpopular system of government. Economic stagnation, an increasingly dismayed young, educated population, as well as pronounced political differences among the conservative elite suggest that the existing system of government is on the brink of collapse. Based on the analysis of open source intelligence (OSINT), the following six outcomes are possible within the next 4 years:

1. The current Iranian regime will agree to compromise with the reformers, leading to the election of a moderate democratic regime that is unfriendly toward the United States.
2. The current regime, unwilling to make concessions to the reformers, crumbles due to a coup d'état or the death of the supreme leader, leading to the election of a moderate democratic regime that is friendly toward the United States.
3. The current regime, unwilling to negotiate with the reformers, crumbles due to a coup d'état or the death of the supreme leader, leading to a take-over by a secular authoritarian regime with low hostility toward the United States.
4. The current regime, unwilling to cooperate with the reformers, crumbles due to a coup d'état or the death of the supreme leader, producing a takeover by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with increased hostility toward the United States.
5. The current regime, unwilling to compromise with the reformers, is able to stay in power through the continued rule of Ali Hossein Khamenei or his son Mojtaba Khamenei, retaining a hostile stance toward the United States.

6. The current regime, unwilling to compromise with the reformers, chooses Ali Ardashir Larijani as its chief, leading to low hostility toward the United States.

Figure 1 shows the spectrum of hostility toward the United States based on the outcomes. The most detrimental result would be if the IRGC replaced the current regime, causing an accelerated nuclear weapons development program and further support of hostile elements in the region like Hezbollah. The best outcome for the Iranian people would be if Iranians democratically elected a regime that is friendly toward the United States, leading to Iran's formal recognition of Israel and complete halt of nuclear weapons pursuit. The outcome of the next four years depends on how the existing regime responds to the reformers, and what the responders would do if they were given control, as outlined by the decision process diagram below. It is difficult to predict the most likely conclusion, but based on what is currently known, outcome one: the regime compromising with the reformers, and outcome four: the IRGC taking over, are probably the two least likely to happen. The subsequent sections will explain why these two outcomes are the least likely as they are contingent on extraordinary events, like direct United States military action against Iran.

Figure 1: The outcomes of Iranian civil unrest over the next four years



Outcome One: Iran elects a moderate democratic regime that is unfriendly toward the United States

The Iranian regime's history of not cooperating with internal opposition groups indicates that it is unlikely that they would change their stance. The regime probably believes that any compromise with the political opponents will lead to a drastic erosion of their power. This hardliner stance is probably based on the lessons of the 1979 Islamic Revolution that brought the current regime to power. As the deposed Shahⁱ made more concessions to the revolutionaries in the late 1970s, his opponents became emboldened to demand bigger change.¹

Furthermore, the government probably underestimates the influence and resilience of the protestors because they lack a single charismatic leader. The civil unrest is supported by a large spectrum of disenchanted Iranian leaders like conservative Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, liberals like Dr. Mohammad Khatami, and moderates like Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who ran in opposition to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2009 presidential election. This perceived weakness actually makes the resistance more durable since it is difficult to extinguish it by focusing on a specific leader or group.

Recently, the regime has responded to protests by arresting hundreds of journalists, academics, and activists.² While the Shah arrested few influential opposition leaders, the current regime seems to have a much broader scope in its suppression. The level of regime suspicion, widespread arrests, and crackdown on the press have essentially transformed Iran into a police state and few people are beyond the regime's reach. For example, the granddaughter of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was arrested on February 12, 2010 due to her criticism of the regime's heavy-handed response to the protests.³ An assault on the late

ⁱ Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi ruled Iran until 1979.

Ayatollah's family and the denouncement of the current regime by the Ayatollah's descendent constitute a serious blow to the regime's credibility. U.S. intelligence can exploit this weakness by recruiting IRGC members who still honor the founder of the revolution.

It is difficult to imagine the majority of the opposition will be satisfied with anything less than a complete overhaul of the current system of government; therefore any concession is likely to result in a new election. Since many of the opposition leaders like Mir-Hossein Mousaviⁱⁱ were former senior officials in the current system, it is unlikely that they would fully normalize relations with the United States if any one of them came to power. But the relations will improve in this scenario, because the leadership will be more responsive to the population, who in large part prefer a less hostile relationship with the West.⁴

Outcome Two: Iran elects a moderate democratic, United States-friendly regime

Iran electing a liberal, democratic regime is not the most likely outcome, but it is more feasible than outcomes one and four. As Figure 1 illustrates, this outcome depends on series of events, the most important being the collapse of the current regime. If the regime collapsed, it is likely that a transitional regime would govern Iran before a true democratic system is established. The key factor would be the transitional regime's willingness to support a legitimate democratic overhaul. If it does, then the Iranian people are likely to elect a regime that is less hostile to the United States, but it is impossible to know exactly how friendly the new regime would be.

The civil unrest is likely to continue until Iran has a credible democratic government. The country's younger generation is very unlikely to tolerate the current rule of the supreme Islamic jurisprudent for an extended period of time.⁵ The highly educated group who makes up a

ⁱⁱ Mir-Hossein Mousavi was prime minister from 1981-1989.

large portion of population (in 2005, 28% of the population was under 15 years old) continues to be frustrated by a lack of opportunities within Iran. Indeed, it is estimated that 600,000 additional job seekers will enter the job market each year in the foreseeable future. This will put upward pressure on the current 12% unemployment rate.⁶

This frustrated young, educated generation can organize much more easily now than they could in the past due to two important factors: first, nearly 70% of the population now lives in urban areas compared to only 31% in the 1950s.⁷ Because the population is much more concentrated, civil society groups can organize more effectively than before. Second, they are Internet savvy. The use of social networking Internet sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, and access to smart phones enable the resistance groups to coordinate through a decentralized, borderless network. Indeed, they have used social networking sites such as Facebook to organize anti-government protests.⁸

The demographic and political changes present the United States government with opportunities to ensure that its intelligence capability and influence within Iran improve in the future. Nearly 200,000 young Iranians who leave the country each year for better opportunities end up either in Europe or North America.⁹ Most of these Iranian have strong ties back home, and some frequently return to Iran to visit their families. Young Iranians in North America typically represent the wealthy portion of the Iranian population because the people who are able to leave now come from families who can afford to send their children abroad and have enough connections to bypass the oppressive regime.

United States intelligence agencies should develop a plan to appeal to these Iranians, to first find out what is happening in Iran now, and have influence once this younger generation takes the reins in any future regime. One tool that can improve the U.S. intelligence services'

ability to recruit the best candidates is to create a database of all Iranians who have come to the United States and Canada in the past five years. Candidates can be filtered by age, education, and city of origin in Iran. Second, the United States sanctions enforced by the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) should not prohibit the spread of Internet technology in Iran. For example, the current Microsoft Messenger is not available in Iran, not because the Iranian regime has prohibited it, but because Microsoft has been unable to pass through the OFAC restrictions.¹⁰ The Iranian regime's decision to block access to Internet social networking sites like Facebook and email services like Google Mail provides the United States with an opportunity to arm the Iranians with technological workarounds to these restrictions. Just like Voice of America and BBC have played an integral role in providing the Iranian public with news from outside the regime, the Internet can be an even more powerful tool for Iranians to circumvent the regimes' restrictions.

Outcome Three: Iran is ruled by a secular authoritarian regime with less hostility toward the United States

In this scenario, the transitional government after the fall of the current regime will not support true democratic reforms. But in order to stay in power, it must listen to the people, who prefer a less hostile relationship with the West. Furthermore, to improve the country's economy, the new regime has to find ways to remove the existing Western economic sanctions against the country, which may lead Iran to halt its pursuit of nuclear weapons.¹¹

Outcome Four: The country becomes a military dictatorship under leadership of IRGC that is more hostile toward the United States

This outcome is likely to put Iran at direct military confrontation with the United States. This is the least likely of all outcomes because , Iranis, unlike Pakistanis and Turks, are

unwilling to support a military dictatorship unless the country is attacked by Israel and the West. In that case, the people will rally behind a strong military leadership against an outside threat. Although the threat of military attack against Iran is not off the table, it is unlikely in the near term based on the following:

1. U.S. troops are already overstretched in Iraq and Afghanistan
2. A surgical attack against Iranian nuclear sites can lead to extreme instability in Israel, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Today, the strategy laid out by the Iranian Supreme leader is largely carried out by IRGC at the tactical level, as described by Iranian experts like Mehdi Khalaji, "the Revolutionary Guards are the spine of the current political structure [in Iran] and a major player in the Iranian economy."¹² In recent years, because of Western sanctions, the perceived imminent Israeli military attack and domestic unrest, the regime has expanded the influence of IRGC, which is the most loyal group in society. Currently, 14 of 21 cabinet ministers are former members of IRGC, in addition to numerous IRGC veterans now serving as governors and mayors.

The IRGC core members were hardened in the 1980s by the 10 year Iran-Iraq war. They see the current domestic and international challenge to the regime as a continuation of a manageable struggle for survival. Western intelligence has linked Quds force, a component of IRGC, to support of Shia insurgents in Iraq, elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹³ The demise of hostile regional powers, like Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq and the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, have increased the influence of Iran within its neighboring countries, thus expanding the role of Quds.

Domestically, Basij Resistance Force, an all volunteer pro-regime para-military group is controlled by IRGC. The IRGC will continue to be the execution arm of domestic and foreign

policy as long as the following trends continue: first, Basij is able to recruit thousands of loyal fighters annually, as has been the case in recent years.¹⁴ Second, Iraq is unable to stop large-scale Shia and Sunni sectarian violence. Third, Hezbollah continues to build on its 2006 successful resistance to Israel. Fourth, the Afghan central government is unable to project adequate control beyond Kabul. IRGC so far has not been substantially weakened by Western financial sanctions, since it has found ways around the restrictions through China and Russia.¹⁵

Outcome Five: The regime stays the same, hostility toward the United States is unchanged

Like outcome four, this outcome will materialize if there is a military attack on Iranian nuclear infrastructure by the United States or Israel. In this scenario, the current Supreme leader or his second eldest son Mojtaba Khamenei will rule the country for the foreseeable future, maintaining a hostile posture toward the United States and continued pursuit of nuclear weapons.

If the current regime is able to stay in power, then it would be important to keep track of Iran's nuclear development program. According to the Institute for Science and International Security's February 18, 2010 report, "in a breakout scenario using low enriched uranium, Natanz [Nuclear Facility] could currently produce enough weapon-grade uranium for a nuclear weapon in six months or less."¹⁶ This claim is substantiated by the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report that expresses concern about the drastic increase of Iranian uranium enrichment since 2008, as well as possible secret weapons programs.¹⁷ The UN Security Council Resolutions 1737, 1747, and 1803 that have enforced sanctions against known Iranian entities involved in nuclear development programs have not stopped the Iranian nuclear weapon pursuit.¹⁸ The Iranian regime has claimed that the country's nuclear research program is for peaceful purposes, and they have to a certain extent cooperated with IAEA in providing information about their program. Iran's nuclear development program seems to have three goals:

provide enough nuclear material for peaceful purposes, such as medical research and nuclear energy; strengthen the Islamic regime's legitimacy at home; and obtain nuclear weapons as a deterrent against attacks from Israel and the United States.

The first goal has been partially achieved since the country allegedly has enough enriched uranium for medical research, but not enough nuclear fuel for a power plant. However, the second goal failed. This is starkly illustrated by the civil unrest in the past few months. The third goal, to obtain nuclear weapons, so far has been unsuccessful or the Iranian government would have announced it. The country's government often is eager to announce its military technological advances, perhaps since it provides a level of deterrence against its enemies.

Better Human Intelligence (HUMINT) is needed to understand the true progress of nuclear enrichment and the building of a nuclear warhead in Iran. According to IAEA, "Iran provided the Agency with mass spectrometry results which indicate that enrichment levels of up to 19.8% U-235 were obtained at PFEP between 9 and 11 February 2010."¹⁹ There is no publicly available information substantiating Iran's claim, but it is nearly certain that Iran is aggressively pursuing high grade uranium enrichment at multiple sites. Better intelligence is needed to map out the Iranian nuclear activities beyond the known sites like Qom and Natanz. Covert action can also enable the United States to further slow down the country's nuclear program by indirectly supplying Iran with bad parts on the black market, where the country is shopping for nuclear development components. The fact that many of the Iranian centrifuges are malfunctioning may be the result of U.S.-supplied faulty parts.²⁰ Dennis Blair, the Director of National Intelligence, recently acknowledged that Iran is "experiencing some problems."²¹ This may also be due to the death and defection of key nuclear scientists, as well as to faulty nuclear material.

Outcome Six: Ali Ardashir Larijani becomes the supreme leader, Iran becomes less hostile toward the United States.

Along with outcome four, this is probably the least likely outcome, but worth reflecting on since Ali Larijani has been one of the most influential Iranian politicians in the past decade and will probably continue to play an integral role if the current system of government survives. He is currently the chairman of the Iranian Parliament, and has held important posts in the country's defense and nuclear development establishment in the past. Although he is a conservative leader, based on his media statements and interviews, he seems to be very practical.²² One example of his practical approach has been to oppose some of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government expansion proposals that would have negative impact on the Iranian economy.²³ It is likely that he would further de-escalate the tense relationship with the West over Iran's nuclear development program, in order to ensure the Islamic regime's survival.

Conclusion

The United States can improve the probability of the most favorable outcome (Outcome 2) by pursuing the following:

- Avoid military action against Iran: this will rally the Iranians around the existing regime against an outside threat.
- Exploit the dissension within the ruling elite, to recruit and engage regime insiders.
- Support the protestors indirectly by helping them access the Internet and utilize communication tools more freely.
- Utilize covert action to subvert the nuclear development program.

Engage the Iranian expatriate community who left Iran recently, in a more systematic way, to improve human intelligence, and build trust networks within Iran.

¹ Ray Takeyh, interview by Bernard Gwertzman, “From Conciliation to Coercion,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 11, 2010: paragraph 14, http://www.cfr.org/publication/21427/from_conciliation_to_coercion.html.

² *Maktoob News*, “Iran jailed over 140 activists, journalists,” June 25, 2009, Paragraph 1, http://business.maktoob.com/20090000006182/Iran_jailed_over_140_activists_journos/Article.htm.

³ Lara Setrakian, “Iran’s First Family of Islamic Revolution Sides with Protestors,” *ABC News*, February 12, 2010, Paragraph 1, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/iran-khomeini-family-backs-protesters/story?id=9813841>.

⁴ Alvin Richman, “Iranian Public Opinion on Governance, Nuclear Weapons and Relations with the United States,” *World Public Opinion.org*, August 27, 2008, Paragraph 18, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/527.php>.

⁵ Mohammad Shakeel, “Iran: Country Profile 2008,” *Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)*, page 6, http://www.eiu.com/report_dl.asp?issue_id=904071275&mode=pdf.

⁶ Shakeel, “Iran: Country Profile 2008,” page 13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Evgeny Morozov, “The Digital Dictatorship,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2010, Paragraph 6, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703983004575073911147404540.html>

⁹ Shakeel, “Iran: Country Profile 2008,” page 13

¹⁰ Morozov, “The Digital Dictatorship,” paragraph 18.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Greg Bruno, “Backgrounder: The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC),” *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 25, 2007, paragraph 9, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/14324>.

¹³ Ibid., paragraph 5.

¹⁴ Ali Alfoneh, “The Basij Resistance Force: A Weak Link in the Iranian Regime?” *PolicyWatch/PeaceWatch*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 5, 2010, paragraph 1, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3171>.

¹⁵ Steve Stecklow, “Iran Sanctions Yield Little,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2010, paragraph 2, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303382504575164181864233298.html>.

¹⁶ David Albright, Jacqueline Shire, and Paul Brannan, “IAEA Iran Report: Enrichment at Natanz improving; Entire LEU tank moved to PFEF: no progress on weaponization,” February 18, 2010, 1, http://www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_Report_Analysis_18Feb2010.pdf.

¹⁷ International Atomic Energy Agency, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1835 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” (Vienna, Austria, February 18, 2010), 9,

<http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2010/gov2010-10.pdf>.

¹⁸ Albright, Shire, and Brannan, “IAEA Iran Report: Enrichment at Natanz improving; Entire LEU tank moved to PFEF: no progress on weaponization.”

¹⁹ International Atomic Energy Agency, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement.” 3.

²⁰ *Economist*, “Who Killed the professor? New light is being cast on the strange death of an Iranian physicist,” February 11, 2010, paragraph 7, http://www.economist.com/world/middle-east/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15502383.

²¹ *Ibid.*, paragraph 8.

²² Nazila Fathi and Graham Bowley, “Rival to Iran’s President Is Elected Speaker,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2010, paragraph 2, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/29/world/middleeast/29iran.html?_r=1.

²³ Meir Javedanfar, “Ahmadinejad’s Economic Plans Are Challenged By Larijani,” *Tabnak News*, October 24, 2008, paragraph 4, <http://middleeastanalyst.com/tag/ali-ardeshir-larijani/>

Bibliography

- Albright, David, Jacqueline Shire, and Paul Brannan, "IAEA Iran Report: Enrichment at Natanz improving; Entire LEU tank moved to PFEF: no progress on weaponization," February 18, 2010. http://www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_Report_Analysis_18Feb2010.pdf.
- Alfoneh, Ali. "The Basij Resistance Force: A Weak Link in the Iranian Regime?" *PolicyWatch/PeaceWatch*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 5, 2010. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3171>.
- Bruno, Greg. "Backgrounder: The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC)." *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 25, 2007. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/14324>.
- Economist*. "Who Killed the professor? New light is being cast on the strange death of an Iranian physicist." February 11, 2010. http://www.economist.com/world/middle-east/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15502383.
- Fathi, Nazila and Graham Bowley. "Rival to Iran's President Is Elected Speaker." *New York Times*, May 29, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/29/world/middleeast/29iran.html?_r=1.
- International Atomic Energy Agency, "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1835 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran." Vienna, Austria, February 18, 2010. <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2010/gov2010-10.pdf>.
- Javedanfar, Meir. "Ahmadinejad's Economic Plans Are Challenged By Larijani." *Tabnak News*, October 24, 2008. <http://middleeastanalyst.com/tag/ali-ardeshir-larijani/>.
- Maktoob News*. "Iran jailed over 140 activists, journalists." June 25, 2009. http://business.maktoob.com/20090000006182/Iran_jailed_over_140_activists_journos/Article.htm.
- Morozov, Evgeny. "The Digital Dictatorship," *Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2010. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703983004575073911147404540.html>
- Richman, Alvin. "Iranian Public Opinion on Governance, Nuclear Weapons and Relations with the United States." *World Public Opinion.org*, August 27, 2008. <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/527.php>.
- Shakeel, Mohammad. "Iran: Country Profile 2008." *Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)*. http://www.eiu.com/report_dl.asp?issue_id=904071275&mode=pdf.

Setrakian, Lara. "Iran's First Family of Islamic Revolution Sides with Protestors." *ABC News*, February 12, 2010. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/iran-khomeini-family-backs-protesters/story?id=9813841>.

Stecklow, Steve. "Iran Sanctions Yield Little." *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2010. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303382504575164181864233298.html>.

Takeyh, Ray. "From Conciliation to Coercion." By Bernard Gwertzman. *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 11, 2010. http://www.cfr.org/publication/21427/from_conciliation_to_coercion.html.