Changes in the Iranian Politics: Since his election as the President of Iran on June 24th, Mahmood Ahmadinejad has baffled both the Iranians inside and outside the country and the people around the world. His remarks about Israel outraged many and his comments on the holocaust were condemned not only by the West but also by many Muslims. He soon demonstrated his ideological extremism and political inexperience and consequently alienated much of the world, reversing Iran’s diplomatic campaign to improve its credibility in the world community.

Iran went through several phases in its international relations following the revolution; but in 1997, Iranian youth, students, women and reform-minded intellectuals brought to power a president who intended to break with past revolutionary rhetoric, pave the way for reform inside Iran and change Iranian foreign relations. Winning 70 percent of the vote, Muhammad Khatami rode to power on the back of middle class voters and intelligentsia who had grown weary of post-revolutionary politics characterized by a lack of respect for law and human rights, violence and authoritarianism. Although Khatami did not succeed to the extent that his electorates hoped in overhauling the domestic policies of the country, he drastically changed the nature of Iran’s foreign policy. He generated, for the first time after the turmoil of the revolutionary era, friendly relations with Arab and non-Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf and its proximity, actively pursued better relations with the Europeans, and responded to the “Clash of Civilization” by the “Dialogue among Civilizations” in the United Nations. He also forged better relations with Asia and Russia and used his office to mediate between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In this case, he broke away from the strict influence of the regime’s Islamic discourse and grip on policy decisions, and sided with Christian Armenia over Muslim Azerbaijan. Domestically, many of his critics argue that he did not know how to use power in defense of powerless and in support of more deeply rooted reforms. That argument is to some extent valid, as Khatami was not a politician but a progressive cleric with modern education and idealism for democratic institutions. He believed in peaceful transition in a political environment that his foes, the conservatives, were relentlessly looking for any opportunity to advance their cause. But many of Khatami’s critics concur that he was adamantly committed to democratic values and succeeded in establishing a robust foundation for democratic debate and a vigorous tradition of advocacy for the rule of law and human rights within the Iranian society.

Khatami’s election to the presidency angered conservatives and disturbed the mesh of power that they composed after the revolution. The conservatives’ revenge came gradually with the imprisonment of reformist figures and student political activists,
closing down of reformist newspapers, prohibiting reformist gatherings and finally the conservative Guardian Council’s banning of more than one thousand reformists from the parliamentary election in early 2004.

The rules of the political game in Iran in the post-Khomeini era are dictated by two overpowering personalities and one institution. It is safe to say that their activities have unyielding impact on the nation’s politics; and it is the nature of their interaction over time that has shaped the ongoing struggle between the reformist and conservative camps. The most important of these figures is the Valiy-e Faqih, the supreme leader, Ayatullah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. Khamenei inherited the mantle of power from Ayatullah Khomeini. Valiy-e Faqih oversees the regular army, the Revolutionary Guard, the Judiciary and the Mustazafan Foundation. This foundation enjoys the ‘spoils’ of the post-revolutionary period: the capital incorporated from the nationalization of factories, as well as wealth and property confiscated from those who were affiliated with the Pahlavi monarchy. Ayatullah Khamenei rests somewhere above the political fray and works to keep the political system in balance. Although he mostly sides with the conservatives, he attempts to influence the nation’s politics, particularly at times of escalating crisis, by flipping over his double-edged sword.

Ali Akbar Rafsanjani is the second most influential and visible figure in post-revolutionary politics. Rafsanjani has held a wide variety of political posts, including membership in the Revolutionary Council; the speaker of the parliament; and two terms as president and the chairman of the Expediency Council (Showray-e Tashkhis-e Maslihat-e Nezam). Working quietly and cleverly, Rafsanjani expanded the power of the Expediency Council, making it one of the most important political organizations in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The third leg holding up the main frame of the Iranian power struggle is unquestionably the Guardian Council (Showray-e Negahban). This twelve member council, dominated without interruption since its formation by conservative clergies, has established a formidable organization overseeing the bills from the Majlis and screening the candidates for various elected positions in the nation. Reformists argue that the Guardian Council has evolved into an organization that is very distant from the idea and vision for which it was originally envisioned. The Guardian Council’s influence on the election process and its habit of screening candidates and rejecting many from participation in the process has become very controversial in the politics of the republic. At the same time, the Guardian Council has been converted into a very strong political tool in the hands of conservatives against reformists and measures to affect social and political change. The Guardian Council has an extended power structure by way of the hard-liner conservatives in the Islamic seminaries of Qum and among the clergies who are appointed for Friday Prayers in various cities and villages of Iran.

As the head of the executive branch of the government, the president can only be influential depending on the level of cooperation and support that he receives from these two individuals and the Guardian Council. Unfortunately, Khatami did not receive the necessary support. Instead, the Guardian Council acted as a formidable organization
blocking his reform programs and reform bills. The Sixth parliament that was dominated by the reformers supporting the president, failed to push more vigorously in the direction of reform, mostly as a result of the Guardian Council’s preventive measures in rejecting bills passed by the reformers in the Majlis.

**Election of the New President:** The project of purging reformists from power culminated in the last presidential election. Mahmood Ahmadinejad won the presidency in a flawed election backed by the hard-line radical conservatives in the seminaries of Qum, the Guardian Council and part of the Revolutionary Guard and Basij(paramilitary). He rose to power by resorting to carefully selected populist slogans emphasizing unequal wealth distribution and corruption. He argued fervently that Iran’s revolution had lost its way and that the lower and lower middle classes were paying a high price while the upper classes lived in comfort and splendor. This argument resonated strongly among the Iranian masses who have to put up a struggle just to sustain themselves. Employing such tactics, Ahmadinejad was following the rhetoric, and lessons learned, from the early days of the revolution. The new president unequivocally declared early on that he intended to revive the fervor and dedication of the early days of revolution and terminate the previous administrations’ failed policies. Ahmad Jannati, his conservative supporter in the Guardian Council, said in mid-December, “The environment of the early days of revolution, in which the spirit of commitment to the values of revolution was dominant, is established once again. We have to take advantage of it now.”

Ahmadinejad’s presidency opened two new phases in Iranian politics. First, his election initiated a new round in the power struggle between the conservatives and reformers, and second, it shook to the core the belief in formal organized political activities among many - especially the reformers.

Two of the leading candidates for the presidency - Mehdi Karoubi, the former speaker of the Parliament, and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the strong head of the Expediency Council - were outraged by the election fraud. Rafsanjani, as a powerbroker himself, saw his image badly tarnished as the result of seven million vote difference between him and Ahmadinejad in the second round when he was competing alone against him. Karoubi dissented openly immediately after the election through a letter to the Supreme Leader Khamenei, exposing the nature of the fraud in the election process. Rafsanjani acknowledged electoral discrepancy but remained less confrontational. For both of these leaders, the fraudulent presidential election fundamentally changed their perception of and attitude toward Iranian politics. Both agreed that they would have to change their strategy and actively seek to confront the conservative religious right by generating more power resources within the society. Rafsanjani, who in the past had played the role of a moderate conservative, was now closer to the positions of the reformers. His backing by part of the reform movement in the second round of the election and the hostile attitude of the hard-line religious conservatives toward him encouraged Rafsanjani to get closer to the reform movement and give up playing the role of mediator between the conservatives and the reformers. Rafsanjani found after the election that the conservatives were not loyal to him and they would use every opportunity to discredit him and curtail his power.
Pertinently, he also found that the future of Iran will be shaped by party politics, democratic reforms, and adherence to the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Rafsanjani successfully lobbied the Supreme Leader for more power for the Expediency Council. In this current position as the head of the Council, he has control over the president and the parliament that is dominated by the conservatives. That in itself was a major thump against the hard-line conservatives and their new president. Both Karoubi and Rafsanjani contemplated something rare in the post-revolutionary politics in Iran; they returned to the idea of formal organized politics in mobilizing political support for desired change in the politics of the nation.

Karoubi resigned from his other positions, including membership in the Assembly of Experts (Majlis Khobregan), and established a new political party, the National Trust Party (Hezb-e Etemad Melli). He also intended to fund a new private Saba TV station broadcasting from outside the country. This is a major development in the post revolutionary Iranian politics, breaking the monopoly of the government in broadcasting. This trend-setting development, if made, will definitely be pursued later by other political figures in Iran. Rafsanjani put together his resources and established the new Moderation and Development Front (Jebhe Etedal va Towsa’eh). The reformers around Khatami and others strengthened their parties and some joined the religious-nationalists in the Freedom Movement of Iran under the leadership of Ebrahim Yazdi in forming a new front called the Front for Democracy and Human Rights. This is also another major step in the direction of assembling various forces with different ideological orientations for the endorsement of democracy and human rights.

Ahmadinejad and his supporters pursued several strategies to strengthen their own power base within the country. They replaced all reformers and moderates in various high ranking positions in the government with their own people. They revived the rhetoric of the early days of the revolution and applied to their politics to win the support of the radical conservatives within the religious establishment and in the society. They also changed the nature of Iranian foreign policy from building trust and credibility to confrontation, especially with the United States.

Ahmadinejad’s confrontational foreign policy emanates from two sources. First, the new president is naïve and does not have a deep understanding of international politics. Second, he comes from a background shaped mostly by his involvement in the war against Iraq in the 1980s. He saw in that war injustice, insecurity and defeat and blames the United States for support of the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. He is offended by Washington’s siding with Baghdad in the war and its indifference to the plight of thousands in Iran and Iraq who were exposed to Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction including chemical warheads during the war. The war mentality has been carried out by him and his group of friends who are currently accompanying him in government.

Ahmadinejad’s remarks against Israel are aimed at competing with al-Qa’idah in the Middle East for support from radical orientations in the region. This support, if achieved,
can help the new president stabilize his power position among the hard-line conservatives within the country. Al-Zarqawi, and his strategy of killing the Shiite in Iraq, has become a new impetus for this president to galvanize support in the Arab Middle East around anti-American slogans for the sake of controlling Muslim radical rhetoric and movements. This strategy has been intensified by the new relationships that have been forged between the new government in Iran, Hizbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine. All of these movements denounce al-Qa’idah and its strategy.

Al-Qa’idah has developed two very distinctive strategies in its violent campaign that have been rejected by both the Iranian radicals and also movements such as Hamas and Hizbollah in Lebanon. Al-Qa’idah has targeted the Shiite, a strategy that has naturally alienated the radical Iranians, Hizbollah and Hamas. As a Shiite political movement, Hizbollah is deeply offended by al-Qa’idah’s atrocities against its brethren in Iraq. Both of these movements are supported by Iran and both cannot afford losing Iranian support. Although Al-Zawahiri warned Al-Zarqawi in a letter in September 2005 about the appropriateness of this strategy, al-Zarqawi rebuffed his master’s contention and continued his violent campaign against the Shiite in Iraq. The rift between Iran and al-Qa’idah developed as early as 1994 when Taliban came to power in Afghanistan and began to support Bin Laden and give his group a refuge in that country. Iran supported the Northern Alliance under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Masood after the fall of communism in Kabul in 1992. The United States was very much in support of the Taliban as a stabilizing force in that country. The policy of supporting the Taliban was initially formulated by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and presented to the United States as the only alternative for the stabilization of Afghanistan when Afghan Mujahideen began a civil war in that country after the fall of the communist regime in Kabul.

The second component of al-Qa’idah strategy is the belief in establishing an “Islamic Government” modeled after the caliphate existing in early Islamic history. This orientation is in direct conflict with the Iranian Shiite version of an appropriate polity under the theory of Velayat-e Faqih, Hizbollah’s vision of a sovereign Lebanon, and Hamas effort in the direction of an independent Palestine. Hizbollah and Hamas are specifically not interested to undertake violent acts outside their territories.

Both of these strategies by al-Qa’idah have encouraged a fierce competition between the Iranian radicals and this organization to seek support in the Middle East and the Muslim world. Ahmadinejad has chosen to respond to this rivalry by raising anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans. Both are attractive slogans for the radicals in a region where the United States has lost its credibility and Israelis continue to postpone a settlement to the conflict with the Palestinians. The Israelis still think that the time is on their side, but as the conflict continues unsettled, it gives time and opportunity to the radical bent in the Middle East to push for support around the anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans. The HAMAS victory in recent Palestinian election is another strong indication that time is not on the side of Israel anymore and the postponement of the conflict resolution with the Palestinians lead only to radicalism inside Palestine.
Conflict Around Iran’s Nuclear Energy:  Ahmadinejad failed on two fronts: in establishing credibility and trust for the Iranian government, and the inability of his team of diplomats in convincing Britain, Germany and France that they are in favor of negotiating a compromise, and the Russians and the Chinese to stay with them in this conflict with the United States. Consequently, Washington galvanized support around its initiative to take the case of Iran’s nuclear program to the United Nations’ Security Council for possible sanction. Of the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) 35 board members, 27 voted for referral; five countries abstained; while only Syria, Venezuela and Cuba supported Iran. After years of opposing such measure, Russia and China finally backed the referral to the United Nations Security Council in late January, bringing the support of India with them too. That was a clear victory for Washington and its ally Israel in the Middle East, the two nations that were not for negotiation with Iran from the onset and supported the case to be taken to the Security Council. Moscow and Beijing settled their differences with the United States on the demand that they along with France and Britain, the three veto-wielding Security Council members agree to allow the issue to rest in the council until March 6th, when the IAEA board meets again and reviews agency’s report on Iran nuclear program.

There are currently two views within the US political arena on how to deal with Iran. One view is the maximalist, prescribing punishment for Iran for non-compliance with IAEA to the point of even attacking their nuclear facilities. In a high-level security conference in Munich on Saturday February 4th, Senator McCain said military action could not be ruled out if diplomatic efforts fail to prevent Iran from developing an atomic bomb. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld echoed the same sentiment by repeating Washington’s view of Iran as the “world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism.” Reuel Marc Gerecht of the American Enterprise Institute, an organization known for its pro-Israel stance, wrote in the Weekly Standard that, “American officials, and especially the president, need to remind Iran’s ruling clergy, connoisseurs of machtpolitik—and the Europeans who are ever ready to appease them—that the United States is quite capable of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan simultaneously, if need be, launching air strikes against the clerics nuclear-weapons and ballistic missiles factories.”

The other view regarding Iran’s nuclear program and the proper handling of the conflict, is presented by some scholars of the Middle East and Iran, and shared by the reformist opposition to Ahmadinejad inside Iran. These individuals are in favor of continued and deepened negotiations with Iran and a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Any drastic measure by the West and the United States against Iran, including attacking Iran’s nuclear facilities and implementing tough sanctions, they argue, will have harmful impact on the reform movement inside the country and a detrimental sway on the region. One of these scholars, R.K.Ramazai, a well known specialist of Iran and Professor Emeritus of Politics at the University of Virginia wrote in Daily Progress (January 29th), “Most Iranians believe that civilian nuclear development is their right, that is necessary for the nation’s growing need for electricity, and for social and economic progress. They would like to see the U.S.-Iran nuclear dispute resolved by peaceful negotiations. That is why U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s statement that the only ‘viable solution’ to the dispute is a ‘negotiated one’ resonated so positively with Iranians. When Washington
threatens Tehran’s political independence, Iranian all unite behind the regime…Only the United States can offer the kinds of incentives – economics, diplomatic and security – that can influence Iran’s policies. The Bush administration needs to move away from the failed policy of containment and engage the Iranian government in discussions that would allow it some face – saving measures to prevent its political sovereignty while enhancing nuclear security for the U.S. – and the rest of the world.”

Ramazani is quiet right on several points on Iranian politics. The Iranian government has succeeded to some degree to mobilize national support for peaceful nuclear technology. The persistent claim is that the effort is indeed peaceful and the United States and Israel oppose Iran’s efforts to advance in nuclear science because they do not want those who object to their policies in the Middle East to make economic and scientific strides. The Iranian government claims that the United States has a double standard in the Middle East, favoring Israel to have nuclear arsenals and nobody else. The level of distrust for the United States is so high among the new government officials in Iran that Ahmadinejad is quoted as saying, “If you give in on nuclear weapons program, they will ask you about human rights. If you give in human rights, they will ask you about animal rights.” Overall, the argument is that there is no end to American demands. America is using Iran’s nuclear demands, the government argues, as a mean of galvanizing international support under the false pretext of security for its longstanding policy of isolating and undermining Iran and hurt its economy.

The Real Power Elite in Iran: What is the reality of politics in Iran today and who holds the reigns of real power? Ahmadinejad may use loud rhetoric but lacks real power. The real power holders in Iran are other individuals currently sitting on the sidelines waiting for opportunities to interfere. They have two problems in getting involved more vigorously and constructively in diffusing the crisis. One problem is related to the nuclear issue that has become more or less a national issue in Iran. The second is related to the fact that the United States is heavily involved in this conflict with Iran. The majority of Iranians believe that they have the right under the NPT to peaceful nuclear technology and the United States is trying relentlessly to prevent it. Ahmadinejad is neither a strong president nor has the ability to mobilize Iranians for his programs inside the country. The nuclear issue is a different, more sensitive issue of national pride however, and the Iranian government has spent all of its efforts and energy to gain the support of the public.

Ahmadinejad is the first president in the history of Iran’s post-revolution that has been exposed to unprecedented level of criticism inside the country. Some of the conservatives within the Iranian parliament joined the reform members and challenged his nominees for various ministerial positions. They opposed three of his appointees for minister of oil while finally the fourth candidate was approved. Even the radical conservative newspapers such as Keyhan occasionally criticize him. The reformist newspapers constantly attack him for mismanaging Iran’s foreign and domestic policies. Students opposed his university appointees in massive demonstrations. Even ordinary people who were originally enticed by his populist slogans to vote for him are now dissatisfied for the
promises made but still not fulfilled. He is the first president after the revolution to face this level of dissatisfaction internally and externally.

Formal power resides in the hands of Rafsanjani and a few others while informal power belongs to millions of educated Iranians who are very disappointed with Ahmadinejad and the process that brought him to power. Ahmadinejad’s resort to absurd traditional religious symbols has been ridiculed by many and has angered many within religious circles. His advocacy of messianic belief in the Shiite tradition and the entanglement of this belief system with the Iranian politics and political process prompted mounting criticism inside the country. His domestic and foreign policies have been criticized and condemned by many inside the country. Ali Ahmadi, a conservative member of the parliament from Mamasani and a member of the parliament’s National Security Committee, showed his dissatisfaction with Ahmadinejad’s remarks concerning Israel in mid-December by saying, “We expect the government to adopt its foreign policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict according to the mandates of the National Security Committee in Iran….The President must adopt special wise policies and wordings in his remarks that do not jeopardize the relationships of Iran with other nations.”

The political process through which he ascended to presidential power was flawed. This is the first election after the revolution with this level of influence from the radical conservatives. Ahmadinejad and his supporters within the Revolutionary Guard and elsewhere organized a presidential campaign that has both components of modern elections and illegal sway which is the prevalent characteristic of authoritarian regimes.

It is obvious now that Ahmadinejad used a vast organization in mobilizing his bid for presidency. Dissatisfied with the state of the economy, the reform movement and a few on the top of the country’s leadership, Ahmadinejad and a group of his friends joined forces with the ultra conservative radical hard-liners within the Guardian Council, Islamic seminaries of Qum, and the Revolutionary Guard to forge an alliance for the control of power. They used a vast secret organization, the Basij, and the influence of conservative clergy, such as Ahmad Jannati in the Guardian Council and Mibah Yazdi in Qum’s seminary, in order to design an election process that could achieve a desirable outcome. The president of the University of Isfahan, one of the appointees of Ahmadinejad, described, “We organized secretly for a few of years. We mended differences with our friends and brought together many individuals. We designed for this day, won the election and now we want to rule over this nation.” The secret organization that he described had link to Revolutionary Guard, Basij, Guardian Council and Islamic seminaries of Qum. This organization discriminated against the candidates through the Guardian Council, mobilized voting through Revolutionary Guard, Basij and seminaries in Qum, and rigged ballots where possible and when necessary. Through legal and illegal means, they filled the ballot boxes in favor of their candidate, Mr. Ahmadinejad. The election is at best questionable for the majority of Iranians including the leading reformers and opposition figures, Rafsanjani and Karoubi.

Ahmadinejad currently faces six challenges within the Iranian politics. The first challenge stems from the ambiguity of his regime’s legitimacy. The election process through which
Ahmadinejad was elected to office is at best questionable for many Iranians. That process has unquestionably tarnished the legitimacy of his government. This election was not only subjected to illegal influence of the Guardian Council through disqualification of many eligible candidates, but also by the direct involvement of other establishments such as Basij. The direct involvement of paramilitary and military in the election process was unprecedented in the history of the previous elections and is considered illegal. Ahmadinejad was not a known figure in the Iranian politics except that he was the mayor of Tehran. Other candidates for the presidency, especially the two powerful clerics Karoubi and Rafsanjani, were well known within the country. The Guardian Council did not have the option to disqualify them. The ultra conservative hard-liners did not have any choice in preventing the election of Karoubi, Rafsanjani or the reform candidates such as Mustafa Moin other than planning an illegal scheme for their own candidates. They intended to prevent the unpredicted scenario of Khatami’s election in 1997 against their candidate, Natiq Noori, to repeat itself.

The second challenge is in the domain of the power struggle that this election has spawned. This election has unified reformers, angered moderate conservatives such as Rafsanjani, instigated discord among the conservatives and drew a line between the conservatives and the ultra hard-line conservatives. The reformers are almost in disagreement with all policies of this government. They argue that Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy is absurdly ideological and confrontational and does not take into consideration the national interests of the country. This foreign policy, they argue, is devoid of trust building and does not encourage friendship and cooperation with Iran. Domestically, they argue that the president and his supporters are not sensitive to desperately needed real change in the domain of the nation’s economy and politics. Moderate conservatives such as Rafsanjani share this belief and many other conservatives criticize the government for the way it has purged many in various government positions. The unease with Ahmadinejad and his supporters has heightened competition in grabbing power among groups rather than cooperation in building the nation’s economy and politics.

The third challenge is in the arena of the nation’s economy. Ahmadinejad came to power with the slogans of wealth distribution and fighting corruption. His government will have a hard time in achieving palpable changes in both areas. The promise of distributing oil revenues among Iranians is at best insincere and deceitful. The ill of Iran’s economy cannot be addressed without a serious attempt at overhauling the state of economy in this nation. Government has mismanaged the economy by discouraging a real market economy in the country. State ownership of inefficient industries and the existence of an insecure political environment that has discouraged foreign investment have created a highly inflationary and low job creating economy in Iran. Many of the foundations that took over the nationalized industries after the revolution are not accountable to government; they are under the control of the Supreme Leader. These foundations accumulated enormous wealth, employed thousands and function beyond the realm of the central government. Any attempt at curing the ills of the economy must take into consideration how to deal with this colossal economic resource and how to put it under
the control of the central government and make them accountable to the central authorities.

From the time Ahmadinejad was elected, billions of dollars have been cart off Iran, according to Iran’s Head of Judiciary branch, Hashemi Shahroodi. The capital outflow is mostly invested in the Persian Gulf region and flourishing economies in Dubai, Qatar and other small kingdoms. Mr. Ahmadinejad could still not find a solution to convince the owners of the capital to invest inside the country. Adding to this problem was the crash of Iran’s stock market that added to lack of confidence in the government. In the domain of fighting corruption, Ahmadinejad could not fight institutionalized corruption as long as the rule of law and accountability has not been established in the country.

The fourth challenge comes from the intellectuals and the educated sector of the Iranian society. Mr. Ahmadinejad has shown little interest in promoting democratic values and institutions inside the country. He is more interested in “Islamic Government,” rather than “Islamic Republic.” His vision of Islam in politics does not suggest any inclination toward democracy. Some of his supporters in the seminary of Qum have directly questioned the republican and democratic components of the government. This has put him in direct collision course with the intellectuals and the reformers.

Iranians in their modern history of the last one hundred years went through the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11), the Musaddiq’s bid for democratization in the 1950’s. The revolution in 1979 had very strong components of anti-authoritarianism and democracy. After the revolution, only under the first provisional government of Mehdi Bazargan (1979) and Khatami’s government (1997-2005), the Iranians saw their leaders’ dedication to democracy. These two periods after the revolution have established a strong tradition of respect for democratic values. The dilemma of Mr. Ahmadinejad is that he has succeeded a president, Khatami, who was respected for his advocacy of democratic norms. Mr. Ahmadinejad faces now the challenge of a highly articulate and educated population who demands the rule of law, respect for human rights and democratic values.

The fifth challenge of Mr. Ahmadinejad generates from the International community. Mr. Ahmadinejad has lost credibility and trust in the international community by remarks he made that was politically inapt for a statesman. His remarks about Israel showed that he is not well equipped for this office and does not understand the imperatives of international politics. His predecessor, Mr. Khatami, brought Iran out of isolation and built the foundation of a foreign policy that gained Iran respect in the region and outside. Ahmadinejad has torn down the wall of that trust that his predecessor built. Many inside the country believe that his confrontational foreign policy has endangered the national interest of the nation and would encourage the isolation of Iran in the international community one more time.

Ahmadinejad faces the last challenge in the area of his ministers and appointees. Most of his appointees lack sufficient experience in dealing with the organizations under their leadership. They are more of an ideological cohort for the president rather than skilful leaders for the job they were chosen. He replaced many skilful technocrats who were in
various government positions after the revolution with less experienced individuals. Many criticized his approach arguing that the country was denied the necessary skills at this critical juncture in its economy and dealing with IAE and the Europeans on atomic energy. The team and a few ambassadors negotiating with the Europeans for several months were replaced by a new group. This policy has created inconsistencies and discrepancies in managing the country more effectively and angered many who have lost their position in government.

With Ahmadinejad in the realm of presidential power, conservatives have realized the old dream of controlling all branches of government. They were sitting on the sideline, criticizing Khatami, and obstructing his reforms. They were critical of the reformers in the past for their stress on building democracy and democratic institutions at the cost of relinquishing crucial economic issues. They have now a historical opportunity to deal with issues that have crippled the country’s economy. Conservatives are not interested in pushing the country in the direction of building viable democratic institutions. In the area of the nation’s economy, they have undoubtedly been the cause of some of its malfunctions and predicament. They have not favored in the past an industrial base economy but rather promoted a merchant mentality that restricted itself exclusively to state planning, import and subsidies. Both of these approaches in the areas of politics and economy will insinuate friction between them and the reformers. This friction will offer an opportunity to the reformers to advance their ideas and vision in various organizations, and try to convince a portion of undecided population, who were deceived by the void slogans in the last presidential election, that their vision is realistic and apposite for the nation’s future. This historical moment is crucial for the development of democracy and democratic institutions in Iran.

Constructing a Constructive Way to Diffuse the Conflict: Considering the challenges facing Ahmadinejad and the volatile political condition that emerged after his election, the West in general, and the United States in particular, need to give careful consideration in how to deal with this administration in Iran. The Iranian reformist camp is very busy in scheming plans to deal with the phenomenon of Ahmadinejad, the power that brought him to this position and the process through which he ascended to power. Any disruption in Iran would interrupt this process upsetting the balance in the favor of the ultra conservative hard-liners.

The United States and the West have limited options in this conflict. The three top doable options are the imposition of severe economic sanctions on the country, attacking the nuclear sites in Iran, and reinvigorated negotiation. Other options such as invading Iran or regime change are totally inconsistent with the nature of Iranian politics and the political culture of Iran. Those who recommend these options are comparing Iran with Iraq and do not have any understanding of Iran, Iranian nationalism, and how Iranian view the United States. Invading Iran and the scheme of regime change are not also doable for the United States and European together because of the limitations of these nations and the influence of world public opinion. The United States was not able to obtain international consensus for the invasion in Iraq, and will definitely not be able to even obtain a shallower consensus for the invasion in Iran.
But the best sanction on Iran is the sanction on Iranian oil exports. The Iranian non-oil export revenue is close to eight billion dollars a year. This amount is very small compared to the revenue of the oil export from the country. The Iranian economy is absolutely dependent on oil revenue. Without oil money, the Iranian government’s ventures will be hard hit. Iran is currently importing close to three billion dollar worth of gasoline from outside because of the shortage in refining capability. This purchasing power will be definitely diminished with the sanction. Lack of support for the Iranian currency through the oil revenue will decrease the value of the Rial, Iranian currency. Both this and the money that the Iranian government has to spend in the black market to buy technology for its economy will usher in inflation in the country and its economy. That will batter the middle and lower classes very badly. The middle class and intelligentsia are the engines of change and opposition to the government in Iran today. Punishing this group, as poorly-devised sanctions will inevitably do, is not in the interest of change and democratization in the country.

Cutting off of Iranian oil from the global market is also not a wise thing to do. Both the industrial and developing nations need 2.5 million barrels of oil, 5% of the world’s needs, that is exported from Iran daily. The swing producers may compensate for 1 million of this amount, but the intense global oil market will suffer the consequences of this shortfall. There is doubt that Saudi Arabia would pick up this 1 million barrel deficit, because the royal family might not want to jeopardize its relations with Iran especially after siding with the rest of the world on opposition to Iran’s nuclear program. With the price of oil climbing even more after the sanction is implemented, the economy of the more poor nations in the developing world will be hit badly.

Many investment firms in the United States believe that the imposition of sanctions on Iran would immediately lead to 2% to 3% decline in global markets. Standard & Poor’s sees dire consequences if sanctions imposed on the Iranian oil export; sending the prices, near record level, even higher. Consequently, that will badly damage global economic growth (The New York Sun, February 6, 2006).

Attacking Iran’s nuclear facilities and imposing drastic sanctions on Iran would have the following serious political consequences: First it would encourage Iran to withdraw from Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iranians have currently the knowledge, expertise and technology to develop nuclear bomb. If their facilities would be securitized by IAEA now, they could not manufacture it. But if there is no scrutiny, Iran will build clandestine facilities and definitely manufacture it later. The Iranian even suggested the U.S. companies to participate in this industry in Iran as a measure of trust building between Iran, the Europeans and the United States. Second, any drastic measure against Iran will play into the hands of Ahmadinejad and his friends in their efforts to radicalize the internal situation among their supporters in the country with the aim of suffocating the existing civil society and reform movement. From the time he has come to power, Ahmadinejad’s government has imposed a series of restrictions on Iranian society, political organizations and student movements. His government devoted funding to ultra-conservative hard-line organizations that subscribe to his ideology and orientation. These
organizations would be definitely used to put pressure on civil society, pro-reform organizations and opposition political parties. Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian human rights activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 wrote recently, “The hardliners, who now control the parliament and the presidency through rigged elections, oppose fiercely Iran’s democratic movement, and will use any credible threat of military attack as an excuse to crash democratic movement. At the same time, a military attack on Iran would only inflame nationalist sentiments. Iranians remember the U.S. help to Iraq during its war with Iran, and see the double standards when the U.S. offers security guarantees and aid to North Korea and advanced nuclear technology to India, but nothing but sanctions and threats to Iran.” Moderates and reformers will never forgive the United States for such action, considering the past bitter experience that they had in 1953 with the American coup in Iran against the democratically elected Musaddiq. The reform movement in Iran is desperately in need of time to challenge the Iranian president and his domestic and foreign policies, and the political processes that the hard-line conservatives manipulate for their gains.

Third, extreme measures against Iran would definitely encourage this government to resort to state sponsor terrorism especially in the Middle East against the United States and Israel. This would not be definitely in the interest of stability in Iraq and the whole region. The United States and Iran have shared strategic interests inside Iraq. Americans want a democratic government inside Iraq, so do the Iranians because they know such a process will benefit the Shiite majority in that country. Americans want a non-fragmented Iraq. So do Iranians, because fragmentation along ethnic or religious lines would lead to civil war inside Iraq and escalate problems with the Kurds. Americans do not want to see any sort of Ba’thist and Sunni restoration or monopolization of power in Iraq, neither do Iranians who in the past fought Saddam’s Ba’thist regime. Iran aided the Shiites in the reconstruction of the country because of its own parochial interest. Iranian conservative hard-liners would definitely be interested in a confrontation with the United States in Iraq. A few weeks ago, Muqtada al-Sadr was in Tehran meeting with high-ranking officials in Ahmadinejad’s government including Ali Larijani, the chief Iranian negotiator on the nuclear program. Larijani praised Muqtad al-Sadr for his stand in the politics of Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr is not only backed by the Iranians, but also by the Saudi Arnibians who want to buy influence inside Iraq. At the end of his trip to Tehran, Muqtada al-Sadr told reporters that his forces will side with Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia should these countries be attacked by any foreign forces. In the case of Iran’s confrontation with the United States in Iraq, the situation would become more destabilized. The forces of violence then would compete for inflicting more damages on the U.S. forces in Iraq. They are certain groups associated with Misbah Yazdi, the ultra conservative clerical supporter of Ahmadinejad who currently promote suicide bombing, Amaliyyt-e Esteshshadi. They have run ads in Misbah Yasdi’s affiliated publications, such as Partov-e Sokhan, to promote the idea and entice membership. Any violent Iranian involvement in the conflict inside Iraq, and any suicide bombings targeting US forces linked to Iran would change the future of US-Iran relations drastically for the worst.

Fourth, extreme measures against Iran would further destabilize the Middle East region and would have the potential to disrupt the flow of oil from different parts of the Persian
Gulf area at this critical juncture in the history of energy supply. There are conservative hard-line members of the parliament in Iran who have suggested confrontation with the United States in the Strait of Hormuz.

The “carrot and stick” strategy and serious negotiation with Iran through a third party such as the Russians and Chinese provide a very useful approach. This strategy would not only resolve this conflict peacefully but encourage the powerbrokers in Iran to get involved directly. Many of them currently advocate moderation, opening the country to the outside world and resolving the conflict with the United States. Many of these moderates question the confrontational foreign policy of Ahmadinejad and want to deal with the United States directly. Ambassador Khalilzad’s recent dialogue with Ahmadinejad’s representatives in Iraq received positively in Iran. Not only had the reformers welcomed that, the moderate conservatives were either supportive or remained silent. That is a major step in building a dialogue between Iran and the United States. Relations with the United States remained a taboo for the conservatives until recently and this meeting. At the same time, the “carrot and stick” strategy would offer the Iranian reformers more time to scrutinize closely the Iranian president’s foreign policy, develop a more acquiescent atmosphere for the criticism of these policies and strengthen their civil society and the movement toward reform and democratization. Next year, there will be a critical election in Iran for the election of the membership in the Assembly of Experts. This forum, according to the Iranian constitution, elects spiritual leader and supervises his activities. This is a critical institution in the current Iranian politics and the constitution of the nation. The reformists are very much involved in the debate of how to influence this election and this institution. There are many moderate and progressive clergies that could run for this forum. This is a very crucial chance to nourish moderates voices within the Assembly of Experts which is one the highest strongholds of the conservatives. There are other steps that the reformers have intended to take in the future in pushing for reform and democratization of Iran. Wise policies toward Iran will offer time and opportunity to the reformers and encourage them to take bolder steps in an environment that is more amenable for political actions.

Both the imposition of sanctions and attacking Iran’s nuclear sites are definitely counterproductive. The West must deal with the issue of fuel cycle right and uranium enrichment in Iran with utmost prudence. These issues are bigger than simply Ahmadinejad’s government. Most of the Iranians think that it is the legal right of Iran as a signatory of NPT to develop scientific projects in this area, regardless of how critical they are of the current government. They do not trust their government either, but want this effort to continue under the supervision of IAEA. Any contemplation of attacking Iran’s nuclear facilities will have dire consequences for Iran, the reform movement inside this country, and the whole region. Any attack by Israel is also considered an attack by the United States because both nations are security partners in the Middle East. Overall, the nations of this region do not separate between Israel and the United States when it comes to political, security and military issues in this part of the world.

Washington must realize that the stakes in the Middle East are now extremely high. The United States is in Iraq and has the responsibility and crucial political stake to stabilize
this country. Washington policy makers must look for every opportunity to eliminate tension in this region. Tension in the Middle East breeds radicalism, conflict, and instability. Israeli prescriptions of how Washington should respond to Iran are shortsighted. Washington cannot afford to destabilize the region farther than what currently is. The recent participation of the Iraqi people in the parliamentary election and the courage shown by the people of Lebanon in forcing the Syrian out of the country are positive developments indicating how the people in this region are geared up for fundamental changes in the politics of their respective countries. These positive developments should be encouraged by more positive engagement and eradication of tension. Less tension in the Middle East not only help the Iranian reformers to push for deeply rooted changes in the politics of their own country, but encourages moderate and reform minded forces in the whole region to demand reform and democratization in their own country.

Two proposals have been tabled by opposition groups in Iran. One belongs to the Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI) and the other to Shirin Ebadi. FMI proposed that the Iranian government should now work with the IAEA and obtain the permission for the operation of the fuel cycles that have exclusive medical, agricultural and research use. Then in a period of five to ten years, the Iranian government would build trust and a solid reputation with the IAEA and pursue more development in this direction. Mrs. Ebadi proposed that “The West must insist that Iran can start a limited uranium enrichment program, strictly safeguarded by the International Atomic Energy Agency in the framework of Iran’s proposal to the E.U. in March 2005, only when it undertakes meaningful and lasting reforms. These include freeing political prisoners, allowing true freedom of speech and the development of an independent press, and permitting all political groups to participate in the political process through elections that are considered free and fair by the international community.”

These meaningful proposals by the opposition in Iran can aide to diffuse the crisis and bring change in Iran’s politics for a more democratic and transparent government. In this process, a third party such as the United Nations should be involved. There exists a high degree of mistrust and animosity between the United States and Iran. The involvement of the United States in any effort leads only to more tension and less result. An international organization can help the Iranian government to benefit from a face saving mechanism and work toward a resolution to the conflict. This is more in tune with the long term-interests of the United States in the Persian Gulf region and the reform movement in Iran. The Middle East is in need of such positive change, and Iran will definitely benefit from a conciliatory nuclear program and measures to strengthen a true democracy.