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EVENT TRANSCRIPT

Iran: After the Sanctions, What Next?

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FABRICE POTHIER: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Welcome to everybody, and welcome to our speakers for this Carnegie discussion about: Iran: After the Sanctions, What Next?

My name is Fabrice Pothier; I am the Director of Carnegie Europe, the European Foreign Policy Centre of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

It's a real pleasure today to host two of the greatest commentators on Iran affairs, Karim Sadjadpour and Roger Cohen from the International Herald Tribune. I don't think I need to introduce both of them at length; I think you're all familiar with their impressive work: Roger writing his column in the Herald Tribune, having been 18 months ago in Tehran, doing the 12th June's protest movement, and Karim being an associate at the Carnegie Endowment and a former Iran Chief Analyst at the International Crisis Group, where he was based between Tehran, Beirut and Brussels.

I'm not going to also introduce our plans for discussion, because I think if you are already here it's to listen to both Roger and Karim, but let me just say that what is interesting with Iran is there is always this feeling of déjà vu. We have a new package of sanctions, we have the high controversial rhetoric of the Iranian leader, we have the hope for maybe some new diplomatic breakthrough, so we have again one of those new cycles of both threat, high rhetoric and hope.

I think what it comes down to is probably the power of politics and the politics of power, both in Iran itself, but also in the region, and finally, at a more global level. I'm going to ask our two experts today to share their thoughts about this notion of: where do we stand with not so much the nuclear issue from a technical point of view, but rather from the politics behind the nuclear

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issue, and therefore where are we opening, where are the challenges, where are the possibilities?

Let me turn to first Karim, and then Roger. You will each have five minutes just to open the discussion, and then I will have some specific questions which would be interesting to interview journalists, so we're going to turn the table and then we interview Roger. Karim.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: Thank you very much, Fabrice, and thanks, all of you, for coming. This is the eighth day of a eight-day tour around Europe that I've had; I was in Germany and Paris, and my last day is here in Brussels, and it's really the highlight to be here with my very good friend, Roger, whose writings on what took place in Iran in the summer of 2009 were, quite frankly, heroic, and I think will be remembered for years and decades to come.

I look forward to a discussion with all of you, so I'll keep my comments very brief. I'm commonly asked about Iran's opposition movement, the Green Movement: whether it's dead, whether it's dormant? I'll say a few words about that and about the debates within the regime now about the nuclear issue, and maybe very briefly about the options of the United States.

I would say that the opposition movement has been demoralised; it's in disarray and it lacks at the moment strong leadership, but I think there's no doubt that that popular will for sweeping change - political, social, economic reform - remains extremely strong. I think, moving forward, the challenges the leadership of this Green Movement are several-fold.

One of the lessons that I myself learnt over the course of the last 16 months is that when you're leading a movement which espouses democracy and tolerance and non-violence, and coexistence, street protests are not a great strategy to succeed with that type of movement, because when you're only playing your play about the street protests what matters then is not what percentage of the population is sympathetic to you, but what percentage of your supporters are willing to go out in the streets and kill and die for this cause?

Again, by virtue of the fact that this is a movement which espouses non-violence, a far smaller percentage of Green Movement supporters are willing to go out in the streets and kill and die for their cause as opposed to Government supporters.

I think, moving forward, the challenge for people like Mousavi, Karroubi, Khatami - we can have a debate about whether they are real leaders of this movement, or whether nominal leaders - but whoever emerges to lead this movement, I think what will be a real challenge will be to recruit the main arteries of this Iranian economy. Whether it's the labour movement, or the Teachers Union, or the bazaar, recruit them under the umbrella of the opposition movement, because what we've seen over the course of the last year and a half, and, quite frankly, over the course of the last few decades, is that these economic interest groups are disaffected for their own reasons.

They've been agitating themselves, but they haven't really been agitated for the same reasons as the opposition. They haven't been agitating for more human rights or more democracy per se, but because their economic interests have been damaged. I think that the challenge of the leadership of the Green Movement will be to show these labour movements, economic arteries, why they're suffering under the mismanagement of the current regime, and how they would be better off in a Green Iran, how a Green Iran would serve their interest.

The point I sometimes make is that if you recall the US presidential elections in 2008, there was a common-line character that emerged, called Joe the Plumber, and President Obama, then

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Senator Obama, and John McCain were fighting over the vote of Joe the Plumber. I always think that Mousavi and Karroubi have to do a better job of talking to Ali the Plumber in Tehran, and explain to him how he would be better off in a Green Iran.

Again, people ask me about the fate of this movement, whether it's dead or dormant - I sometimes think about the Palestinian cause for self-determination. Despite being incredibly outmatched financially, militarily by the Israelis, this will for self-determination hasn't been extinguished. You could argue it has continued to grow strong.

Iran's quest for self-determination, as Roger has written about a lot, is a centennial quest: it goes back to the 1906 constitutional revolution; so I see this will for change remaining very, very strong, but it's a movement which needs leadership. I'm not one who believes that every person out in the streets can be a leader, and you don't need leadership; I do think you need leadership. I think that that's going to be the challenge, moving forward.

Let me just say a very brief word about the view from Washington, because that's where I live; there have been so many debates happening in Washington. I think there are three historical analogies which are most commonly invoked in Washington, to try to capture the character of the Islamic republic, and try to assess its future trajectory. Each has a different implication for US policy.

One has to argue that Iran is like 1970s China, that despite its own rhetoric, it's actually fundamentally a pragmatic regime, not ideological, and it yearns for a rapprochement with the United States. This requires simply a bold US gesture, kind of like Richard Nixon's visit to China. I think that this analogy was much more involved in the Bush administration, at a time when the United States shunned dialogue with Iran. I think the last year and a half of the Obama administration's, I would argue, unreciprocated overtures, unprecedented and unreciprocated overtures to Iran have dampened down the enthusiasm of the China analogy.

The second analogy which is commonly invoked is to argue that the Iranian regime is messianic, it's deeply ideological, it's apocalyptic, and it's therefore undeterrable. There are oftentimes comparisons made to Nazi Germany; you'll hear this a lot from Prime Minister Netanyahu and neoconservative circles in the United States: to say Iran is like Nazi Germany and Ahmadinejad is like Hitler. The policy prescription there is what I'd call pre-empted military action. I just don't think that that's the way President Obama views Iran.

The last analogy, and again, these analogies are far from perfect, but it's to argue that the Iranian regime is not messianic; it wants to survive; what's paramount for them is their own survival, but in a way, anti-Americanism has become central to their identity. It's become for the current leaders in Iran... it's interpreted as a fundamental pillar of the revolution and therefore they're not willing to abandon that, so it's very difficult to reach a modus vivendi with a regime which seems to me and you as an adversary.

You can contain them until they are eventually forced to change, or they crumble under the weight of their own internal contradictions and economic what-ifs. The analogy there is the Soviet analogy, to say that there's a value in dialogue, there's a value in engagement, not necessarily to resolve the conflict, but to contain the conflict and mitigate the prospect of misunderstanding, and so we wait until this regime is forced to change.

I'll leave it there, and look forward to your questions.

FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you, Karim. Roger.

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ROGER COHEN: Thank you very much, Fabrice. I'd like to start by saying that in this strange obsession, unexpected obsession, that took hold of me over the past two years with Iran, Karim has been an extraordinary friend, as well as the wisest of counsellors. I'd like to thank you for that, Karim. It's really been very special, discovering your friendship.

I went to Iran – well, I'd been as a hippie in early 70s, but that didn't really count – but I went back in 2009 for about three weeks, and then I went again for about a two-week period over the election. I got lucky: the Iranians... I argued strongly for engagement after my first trip, which got me into a lot of trouble with the neocons in the US; I argued for that on the basis of this sophisticated, complex society I saw, which I thought had been horrendously simplified in the United States, and that caused the neocons to unleash their anger. The Iranians kind of liked me for doing that, I guess, and so they gave me a slightly longer visa: two weeks instead of one, and then I happened to arrive two days before the election rather than, as most people, one week before.

Those who had a one-week visa and arrived five or six days before obviously had to leave right after. I was among the last out of Iran, and in 30 years or so as a journalist I've never witnessed, I don't think, such extraordinary, riveting, ultimately shattering scenes of a people who were buoyant with hope on the 9th, 10th, 11th June 2009, and who then saw that hope crushed with extreme brutality.

I was on the streets the morning of the 13th, early in the morning, and Mousavi's headquarters by 10 AM had been turned upside down; there was smoke pouring out of it, it had been set on fire, there were shock troops going back and forth outside it, and if you loitered for a moment, they simply beat you - man, woman, child – didn't matter.

Just to settle one point, if you've won a glorious victory, if you've won by two-thirds of the vote, if you have 63% of Iranians... is this how you celebrate? Is this really how you celebrate? I don't think anybody who was in Tehran that morning can believe that the numbers we were given were the real numbers.

The demonstration on the 15th June, when everybody went down to the avenue - between Enghelab and Azadi, between revolution and freedom – this wide avenue through the centre of Tehran. We all went down there with fear in our hearts, and then to emerge onto that avenue and just: my god, this is really happening! To look back and forward, and see what the mayor of Tehran, Ghalibaf, later estimated at 3 million people, to see Iranians rising in their dignity, massively and in silence, with such courage, demanding simply at that moment that their votes be counted, was something absolutely remarkable.

Iran was on a razor's edge, and I will ask myself until the end of my days, what would have happened if Mousavi or somebody had said to that crowd: now we turn on the presidential palace? Because in a crowd that size the force is with you; even a Tiananmen is unthinkable in a crowd that size.

In any event, what happened happened; the Green Movement was suppressed, with great brutality and ruthlessness; that's what did it: fear. Fear was instilled in what was that day a fearless Iranian people, but those sentiments didn't disappear; I don't believe for a moment that that rage, that anger, or that disappointment has gone away.

I believe still that millions of, especially younger Iranians, and as you know, two-thirds of Iranians are under 35 at least, who were in... in my first trip, I found many people in a position of what I'd call a kind of reluctant acquiescence. They didn't like the regime, but they thought every four years they got to nudge it, one way or another. Then they saw that idea simply

crushed; they saw that now in the Islamic republic it is the Supreme Leader and his henchmen, the Revolutionary Guard, who decide; so that sentiment is there.

Disaffection is very widespread in Iran; I think it's impossible to estimate how widespread, but that disaffection is there. The economy seems to get by, although there were rumours on the Rial the other day. This is a society that is much too sophisticated, has been looking for much too long for some form of representative government, was led to believe in 1979 that this was a revolution, at least in part, for constitutional governance and freedom, that the word republic, an Islamic republic, meant something. All these things, a majority of Iranians believe.

Now when, how, through what means those sentiments, rather than being suppressed, come to the surface – I don't know. I don't think Karim knows, I don't think Fabrice knows, and all the crystal ball-gazers in Iran, in the end, are guessing. What's more, they're guessing in a fairly haphazard way because it is a very opaque system; it's hard to read.

Hillary Clinton uses the military dictatorship image more and more; I still don't think that's really right, although the Revolutionary Guards have certainly gained in power. Maybe they're more of a mafia; they're a sort of set of business interests with guns, but even that set of business interests with guns has some countervailing centres of power, be it in Qom or in the Majlis, or elsewhere.

One thing Iran is not still, I think, is monolithic; it's not Saddam Hussein's Iraq, it's certainly not North Korea; and that makes difficult, and frustrating and full of riddles, and in a society, in a time when people are in a hurry and they want black and white, they want to be clear, that's quite hard to cope with.

I'll just say this; I haven't written about Iran for about three months, and even though I had breakfast with Ahmadinejad in New York about ten days ago, and in the end I didn't write about it, when I ask myself why I'm not writing about it, why I can't bring myself almost to write more columns about it – and I will, I know; I will go back to it – but I've been overwhelmed by a sort of disgust allied with despair.

It was partly seeing Ahmadinejad in New York, this man who supposedly hates the West, completely seduced by the Western media, by Christiane Amanpour, by craving nothing more than having columnists from the New York Times trooping around. He's got it down; his basic riff is: it's a hypocritical world, there are double standards; Israel has a bomb; you talk about our capital punishment, what about the United States; you talk about our economy, what about Wall Street in 2008...? Then he loses it every now and again, like in the 9/11 comment, or in the comment at the breakfast, saying that the US had never fought a war, all it had ever done was drop these two bombs on Japan.

In the end, I find Ahmadinejad odious – yes, certainly, absolutely – just as I find his regime odious, and I'll never forget the brutality I saw. Do I go to sleep at night fearing for Israel, fearing for America, fearing? No, I think this man is odious; I don't particularly think he's dangerous. I see that Israel has just put down to 2014 now, the date where Iran might be in a position to race for a bomb. Well, they first predicted for 1995, so that's now 20 years that we've seen this receding spectre.

The other element in my despair/disgust is – I don't blame President Obama, but he came in with some original ideas, and I think we're back to the same old, same old. Fabrice mentioned hope; I don't have much hope right now. Carrots and sticks make a lousy stew; there is no perfect calibration for carrots and sticks. I know Dennis Ross, amongst others, thinks there is a perfect calibration of carrots and sticks; there isn't.

It's insulting to Iranians to have sanctions, they don't like it, it offends their pride, and we're stuck in this psychotic Iranian-American relationship, with these views of each other which have much to do with old traumas, which I won't go into right now.

Finally, the third element in my feeling is – I watch this debate in the US between the Labourites on one side, who think the Green Movement never existed, and this government: it's all fine and dandy, and it's all great; and then the other extreme, the far right, for whom Iran is an abstraction; they don't give a damn about Iran, they don't know the first thing about Iran, they've never taken an interest in Iran. It's just an abstraction: do we bomb it, don't we bomb it? That's all it boils down to. There is absolutely nothing else involved. Between the Labourites and Lieberman, and there are people to the right who believe in them, back and forth it goes, back and forth it goes. Anyone prepared to really think in a nuanced way about Iran, I think, they're fairly few and far between.

Just this thing, in conclusion; I'm not sure Karim agrees with me about this. What do we want to do? We want to get past this psychosis; we want to get to the table. I thought the Turkish-Brazilian proposal of April was dismissed in much too highhanded a way. Was it perfect? No. Was it nearly perfect? No. Was it a million miles from what the United States had suggested in October 2009? No, I don't think. There were some differences, yes, about which everyone made a huge meal, but I think, in terms of getting to a new place, new thinking, there was more to think seriously about in there than it was accorded by the powers that be. I'll stop there.

FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you very much, Roger. I think we'll get back to the question of the Turkey-Brazil initiative, but before that, I just wanted to ask both of you about the new power configuration after the 12th June in Tehran and in Qom between the Supreme Leader, the president and also the Revolutionary Guard. Have we seen a radicalisation, and what does it mean for, in fact, the political future of Iran, but also for the future of engagement with Iran?

KARIM SADJADPOUR: I think 20 years ago, ten years ago even, when people were talking about Iran they would refer to it as a veritable autocracy, a country ruled primarily by clerics. What's happened, slowly, over the course of the last decade, is that the institution of the Revolutionary Guards, I would argue, has really eclipsed the institution of the clergy, in terms of their economic prowess, their political influence, and especially their foreign policy influence. The Revolutionary Guards are running Iranian foreign policy in hotspots like Iraq, Afghanistan, the Levant. Even the foreign ministry has essentially been relegated.

I would emphasise that neither one of these institutions, neither the clergy nor the Revolutionary Guards, are monolithic. I can name for you very hard-line Revolutionary Guards, but also some far more moderate, pragmatic Revolutionary Guardsmen. The example I sometimes give to people is that, if you recall the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003 in the United States, there was an interesting phenomenon in that many of the most outspoken anti-war activists were generals, they were individuals who'd actually served in war, and they were far less enthusiastic about war than their civilian counterparts who'd never served in war.

I think there's a similarly interesting dynamic in Iran, in the sense that you have a couple of generations of Revolutionary Guardsmen who served in one of the bloodiest wars of the second half of the 20th century, with Iraq, and in my experiences of dealing with them personally, they're oftentimes far less ideological and more pragmatic than folks like Ahmadinejad and others, who haven't really seen the type of war experience.

Now, I would argue that: where does power now lie? I'm one who believes that the Supreme Leader is still the most important single individual in Iran on important matters of State,

whether it's the nuclear issue or political matters; his word is still more important than others, and constitutionally he's the head of the Revolutionary Guards. What he's done has been very interesting; if you look back at his 21-year career now, he lacked the clerical credentials of his peers; he wasn't an ayatollah when he was selected to replace Khomeini. I joked that he took Ayatollah for Dummies, and he was an ayatollahship almost overnight. Given the fact that he lacked the credentials, and he in some ways lacked the respect of his clerical peers, he sought legitimacy in the barracks rather than the seminaries.

The turban and the robe that he wears is somewhat misleading; I would argue he's put his lot much more with the Revolutionary Guards than he has with the clergy. What he's done over the course of the last two decades it to handpick the first few tiers of Revolutionary Guard commanders. He cultivates them over the years and he changes them regularly, so they're not able to establish their own power-base.

If this is any indication, I think it's interesting in that I can give you many examples of Revolutionary Guardsmen and Basij publicly criticising President Ahmadinejad, many examples. I haven't recalled a single example of the Revolutionary Guards publicly criticising Khamenei.

There's just more point that I want to make, and I think this is a question I'm commonly asked: about whether a Green Iran, or a more democratic Iran would make any difference, in terms of the way Iran approaches the outside world, in terms of Iran's foreign policy. It's commonly said, well, Mousavi wants a bomb as much as the current leadership does. I think there's a fundamental point which deserves to be made, which is to say that the current leaders in Iran, Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, etc, I think they came of age intellectually and politically at a time when there was one very dominant trend in the late 1970s, which was anti-imperialism.

They still, I think, very much subscribe to that zero-sum worldview that either the West or the imperialist powers win, or we win. The way they frame the nuclear issue to their population is very much in that context, to say that the imperialist powers want to deprive Iran of nuclear energy to keep us barefoot and backward.

When you listen to the rhetoric of the leadership of the Green Movement, particularly when you talk to the younger generation of Iranians, I would argue if there's one dominant trend happening, one dominant worldview, it's not anti-imperialisation, it's globalisation. Globalisation implies a very positive sum worldview - that we're Iran, we're proud to be Iranians, we want to be independent, but we also want to be part of the world, and we want our proper place in the world.

I think that when it comes to matters like the nuclear issue, and other matters, I'm not arguing that they would simply capitulate, but I think that they would be far more willing and interested in trying to allay the concerns of the outside world, and build confidence with the outside world.

FABRICE POTHIER: Roger.

ROGER COHEN: Yes, I would very much agree with Karim on that last point. All the young people I met in Iran, and the not-so-young, they're in many ways ashamed of Ahmadinejad. They don't want a president who gets up to speak in Geneva, who gets up to speak in New York, and 27 or 28 or 35 diplomats from leading countries around the world walk out. Iranians are proud; they don't like that, they find it really shaming. They want contact with the...

I was there for the 30th anniversary of the revolution, and there was a huge crowd, largely bussed in, of course, and the sort of muzak-like calls of being admired by America, left America, said with the minimum possible enthusiasm. In the crowd, I couldn't find my driver afterward,

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and my interpreter said, well, let's get on the subway. We got on the subway and, in theory, there are men's cars and women's cars, but...

I often think of Iran being a bit like Italy; there is a strong chaos factor that quickly sets in, and Bushehr, they've been trying to get that nuclear plant going. Yes, in quite adverse circumstances, but for 40 years now...

Anyway, needless to say, the whole male/female thing had completely broken down, and men and women were all sort of piled on top of each other in this subway car. There was a young woman standing four inches from me, and suddenly, out of the blue, she said in good English, where are you from? I said, New York. She said, oh, America! This rippled down the subway car, you could see all these faces turning, and you know when you're somewhere – the slightest menace, you can detect it, and you can detect the opposite of that, and it was the opposite of that. There was a kind of very positive vibe that went through that whole subway car.

Then I said, what do you do? She said, I'm a medical student, and I said, oh, my daughter's a medical student. And we had this little chat and that was it. But that's Iran, or at least significant swathes of Iran. There's really this thirst for contact with the West.

I think one of the mistakes of tone that Obama made after the vote was that one statement in which he said, in terms of fundamental US national security interests, Ahmadinejad or Mousavi – it doesn't make a whole lot of difference. As Karim said, Mousavi, or some Mousavi-like sane, reasonable person, would not immediately capitulate on the nuclear programme, but he would not be the negotiator from hell, which in many ways is what... he would not suddenly deny the Holocaust, or say that America took down the Twin Towers itself, or that the United States had never fought a war. Diplomacy is also about tone, it's about manner, and Mousavi would be a reasonable interlocutor, so I think that does make a big difference.

On the internal balance of power, I think it's very hard to read. Clearly, the Revolutionary Guards have been ascendant; they took control in the immediate aftermath of June 12th, they orchestrated the terror, and they have very significant control, but as I said earlier, I don't think it's by any means exclusive.

I thought after the election, I still believe that Khamenei took an extraordinary gamble by leaping into the fray that way. Part of the strength of his office was always being the Supreme Leader, being the Prophet's representative on earth, and instead of which, he gave that extraordinary sermon, vicious sermon, a week after the election, and sided very clearly with Ahmadinejad. I think all the aura, all the mystique, such as it was, of that office disappeared then. [Inaudible] Khamenei was one of the most extraordinary cries going up from the roof of Tehran for weeks after – death to Khamenei, death to the Supreme Leader, which even six months before the election would have been unthinkable.

I think over the long-term the office probably is weakened, and I don't know how Iran would handle a succession to that office, whether it could handle a succession. Nor do I know what the next presidential elections, how they will be able to handle that. I think the whole polity is a lot more fragile than it was.

In terms of whether we can engage with that fragile polity, I think Ahmadinejad – certainly, I've heard a lot in Tehran, I believe it, that the right or the Principlists were damned if they were going to let the Reformist, Mousavi, bring home the great prize, which is, given what I said about the subway, normalisation with the United States. They want to do it themselves. I agree with Karim, I think ultimate authority still lies with Khamenei, and my impression is he's not ready to make that gamble.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: Can I make a brief comment?

FABRICE POTHIER: Sure.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: Roger, I thought what you said about the Supreme Leader was absolutely right. I want to say for myself that up until June 11th, 2009 and in June 12th, 2009 Khamenei had a wonderful job, wonderful gift, because he wielded power without accountability.

If you look... I lived in Iran over a period of several years, and I can tell that when people would complain, as Iranians incessantly do about the economic malaise, the lack of political freedoms, lack of social freedoms, it was usually the president who bore the brunt of their criticisms; so during the lapse in January people would say, ah, this guy is corrupt. Khatami was weak, Ahmadinejad is crazy, or the various adjectives they ascribe to him, but Khamenei usually got off scot-free because of this notion that he was playing above the fray, he was keeping out of the day-to-day politics. I think that was also the perception somewhat internationally.

The study I did on Khamenei, one of the reasons I did it was because I remember Googling Ahmadinejad around 2008 and there was like 20 million hits; and I Googled Khamenei and there was like 500,000 hits. There was very little written about him; he hasn't left Iran since 1989. I think that he's lost that great gift that he has of wielding power without accountability, as you said, by coming out very forcefully and siding with Ahmadinejad.

I think he's now put himself in a position which is going to be very difficult to get out of, because on one hand, Ahmadinejad is really a maverick who is very difficult to control, and I think Khamenei realises that Ahmadinejad has even grander ambitions than the presidency; he's not someone who's going to walk away gracefully from power.

I think Khamenei - and Ahmadinejad has also, I would argue - he cost the country a lot, in terms of political and economic isolation. Those who argue that Khamenei will cut him loose or allow the parliament to impeach him also have to realise that, I think in a way they've become Siamese twins, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, and Khamenei realises that if he tries to separate the two, he himself could perish in the process, the people will come after him next.

He's in this difficult situation where Ahmadinejad's antics are costing the country a lot, but I think Khamenei realises that getting rid of him will have potentially enormous repercussions for himself.

FABRICE POTHIER: You both alluded to an important question, which is: what do Iranian people want? What do they think? Because the picture is, for me, slightly more complex than the one of the Green Movement only, and even probably within the Green Movement we have different shades of green, like either radical, conservative ones, they are different shades of grey.

It seems that we have configuration, like city versus countryside; we have also the revolution generation versus the post-revolution generation. I would be very interested in hearing your take on what's the complexity of this Iranian public opinion. My implication in that is, the president must surely have some public support of some sort in order to sustain his office and his power, so I would be curious to hear about that, too.

ROGER COHEN: Yes, Ahmadinejad has some support. I would estimate - I'm just plucking a figure out of the air - but I would estimate he had maybe 30%, 35%; I think it might have been a

run-off on June 12th. There's no way he won with that number. Everybody I saw before the election... it just didn't happen like that, but there was such momentum, there was so much... Tehran was bubbling, and Tehran's a very significant proportion of the Iranian population, they weren't prepared to let it run for another week. There was no way they were going to do that.

I think that the young people of Iran want change, without question. Precisely what form of change they want, I don't think they're quite sure about that themselves. At the beginning, the protest was about wanting their votes counted, then seeing what had happened, it became more radical.

Could the position of the Supreme Leader, with a succession or in some other circumstances, change so that it became more of the function of le roi Baudouin here or something like that, just allowing – maybe that's a bad analogy – but in any event, just to allow more republican politics to play out? There's no question that... this is not going to go away.

The Iranian people, since 1906 and beyond, have been questing for some form of representative government, and you feel that very strongly when you're there, and you feel moreover that it's ready in many ways. This is a country with 4 million, roughly, kids in college; a high degree of civic engagement in many areas... I'm not trying to... there's poverty in Iran, and there are backward areas, but this is not Afghanistan. Here we are, spending huge sums, trying to create some form of democratic polity in Afghanistan – well, Iran, I think, at least theoretically, is ready for it, but this country lurches, it just keeps lurching, and it's the most tragic thing.

The Shah's father in the 1930s banned the veil, like Ataturk, and 40 years later the veil becomes obligatory. Could we ever reach some midway point between that? I think that's what a majority of Iranians is looking for, but the road from here to there is hard to discern.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: I agree with that very much, and I would say, just anecdotally, having lived also in Beirut, I think you would be hard-pressed to find a more liberal capital in the Middle East than Tehran, a more liberal society. Beirut, I think, may be comparable.

Certainly, when you go to places like Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, and Morocco and Tunisia, if you keep down the list, I think that you hear popular romanticism about the prospect of joining Islam and politics, and in Iran, by virtue of the fact that they have done that experiment unsuccessfully for the last three decades, you have very few people romanticising about that. I should add the term... My father's side of the family come from the traditional middle classes, quite religious, and one thing that people don't understand is that the religious classes in Iran are sometimes even more disaffected with the Islamic republic than the secular classes, because the argument they will make is that these guys have tainted the name of our religion.

This is a very brief anecdote for you; a few years ago I was based in Tehran, I was going to interview an advisor to President Khatami, so shortly before Ahmadinejad's first election, and the taxi driver taking me spent the first 30 minutes of our ride cursing the government. The last ten minutes I said, can we just relax a bit, because I have to prepare for this interview? This was someone who was describing his life for me, he was educated up until the ninth grade.

Shortly before we arrived at the destination he said, Mr Karim, do you like melon, kharbozeh? I said, yes, I like melon. He said, what about honey? I sell it; do you like honey, too? I said, yes, I like honey, too. He said, well, never eat the two of these together, because it will create a storm in your stomach – this is one of these old wives' tales: don't eat hot and cold together. I said, okay, I promise not to eat melon and honey together, and thought to myself, oh, what does that have to do with what he was saying earlier about cursing the mullahs?

He had this dramatic pause, and he said, you know, Mr Karim, politics is melon and religion is honey; these two things separately are both good, but when you mix them together it ruins the name of both politics and religion. You would find it very hard-pressed to find a taxi driver in Cairo, or in Islamabad, or in Riyadh, who is able to offer you that perspective. This is a grassroots intellectual evolution.

I would just say that no one is making the argument that all Iranians are secular, Jeffersonian democrats. Even in the United States you can't have a president who comes to power who claims to be irreligious, so certainly the society remains traditional, remains religious, but I think that there is now a widespread appreciation that you can actually preserve the integrity of religion more when you separate it from politics.

FABRICE POTHIER: Before I open the floor, I just wanted to take the second big lens of this discussion; we talked about local politics, now I want to talk about regional politics.

Iran has led a hyperactive regional strategy, with proxies in the Levant, in Iraq, to an extent in Afghanistan, and yet the region is now facing a kind of unusual time. We are both in the post-Iraq War configuration, where all the factions said that Iran in a way has won, and yet we have had the Cairo speech of President Obama, who has partly deconflicted the negative views on the US from the region. In that case, you have lost one of its main arguments, which is to say, we all look at the US.

Where is the Iranian leadership, and Iran as a whole, how is it perceived in the region? Is it still this spoiler, like it was just after the Iraq War?

ROGER COHEN: I think the Obama speech was very important; I think the outreach from the president is very important. I think there's been some disappointment in the aftermath, to the Obama speech and the follow-through. I also think that Ahmadinejad is a somewhat reduced figure. Those scenes in Tehran in the summer of... they didn't go unnoticed in the region.

I think generally Iran, for the first decade of the 21st century, saw a steady ascendancy. I think right now, with oil where it is, the internal situation, I think we've passed that zenith a bit, and it's more of an intuitive feel. I don't think Iran is quite as influential as it was. That said, it remains an extremely important power. Of course, it would be better to have it inside the tent than outside the tent, as it's always been in trying to pursue Middle East peace.

It was interesting to me – I was saying this to Karim upstairs – that Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador in Washington, an historian, spent a recent Jewish holiday going around the synagogues of Washington, talking not about the direct peace talks, which had just resumed, only to abort, at least temporarily, a few weeks later - not really talking about that at all, but just talking about Iran, Iran, Iran, Iran, the threat of Iran.

Sometimes I think Iran has become a kind of post-modern danger; it's out there, it's in the blogosphere, it's... and Iran, yes, has done some bad things, but the threat of Iran does not seem to me to be imminent in any way, or concrete. Therefore, I think there is space, and I think it's extremely important to move forward on Israel-Palestine. It seems to me that if you're building schools and other things in the space where Palestine is supposed to be born, that is unhelpful. The United States does not appear at this moment to be able to sway the centre-right Israeli government of that, so we seem to be stuck on that front.

Maybe I'm naïve, but I try to think through sometimes how Iran gets a bomb. For all the craziness of Ahmadinejad, it is true that Iran remains in the NPT, the IAEA, that there are inspectors from the IAEA at Natanz, that there are cameras at Natanz, that everything is tagged,

everything is chronicled, everything is followed; and, yes, we found that hole in the mountain at Qom, but it was basically a hole in the mountain.

Now, do we think, with all the resources we have trained on that country right now, and we seem to be also being fairly successful with some cyber warfare, with all those resources, is there beneath Yazd, or near Mashhad, or somewhere under the desert some Tom Clancy-like facility, where this, as I said, rather messy Islamic republic, given to chaos and disorder and lack of clarity, is in fact, as we sit here talking, enriching uranium to much higher levels, building warheads, etc?

I don't think such a facility exists - maybe it does - I don't think so, and of course security forces are trained to err on the side of prudence, and so we should, but it seems to me that if Iran is ever going to race for a bomb it has to throw out the inspectors, throw out the IAEA, and it's going to be pretty clear to us.

We're not there yet, and I think Iran, they're Bazaaris: they love ambiguity; and that's where they are: in ambiguity; and I think they would forsake ambiguity only with great reluctance. I come back to Khamenei, he is the guardian of the revolution – that is his title, and if you're the guardian of something that's a fairly conservative business, you're trying to preserve something.

There is this view of Iran, as Karim mentioned, and Netanyahu's used this repeatedly, of an apocalyptic messianic power. I think if you look at Iran's acts since 1979 rather than its words, if you look at its deeds rather than its proclamations, one of the reasons it survived this rather unlikely creation is that when the rubber hits the road, when it's tough they err on the side of prudence, they're pretty prudent; so that's where I come down.

Maybe we will get some negotiations going. I must say, I pity the poor American negotiator; the Iranians are absolutely brilliant in that field, they've been doing it for a long time. Probably many of you in this room are familiar with tarof, this elaborate, slightly hypocritical flattery that you encounter many times in Tehran, which makes it very difficult to pay for anything, because everybody's angle is, no, we can't possibly; and then by the end you're in a very tough haggle over pennies.

I thought of this the other day when I was negotiating with an Iranian-American about an honorarium for a speech that I'm supposed to make at a college in the US, and we were slightly apart and he said, and I requested a certain amount. He said, well, I could pay you X, but if I pay you X then I would have to cut some other expenses so I would rather pay you Y, which was somewhat lower, but I'll leave it entirely up to you whether you choose X or Y, and the one thing I would like to say is that whatever we decide, your contribution will be priceless. I was just paralysed by this, I didn't know... I thought it was so... There I was trying to imagine Dennis Ross trying to deal with some equivalent on the nuclear front - it's not easy!

KARIM SADJADPOUR: I think that when you look at the Middle East, you look at the Middle East from the White House. It's undeniable that many and most of the outstanding political and security questions which the region faces, Iran has a role in them. If you look at Afghanistan, Iran has enormous border, enormous influence in Afghanistan and Iraq. Given Iran's support for groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, it's made itself almost integral to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the future of Lebanon. Given its oil reserves and its mere size, it's integral to the issue of Gulf security and energy security.

I think the challenge is that - my own assessment of Iran's policies and its behaviour - is that it sees itself as a counterweight to the United States in the region. In some ways it sees itself embroiled in a zero-sum game for power and influence in the region, and I would go so far as to

say that I think Iran's ideology resonates the most when people feel most angry and outraged towards the United States and Israel.

I think, personally, that Iran reached its peak, in terms of its soft power and its regional influence, in December 2006, when Lebanon was being bombed by Israel. Oil prices had shot up over \$100 a barrel and Iraq was in a state of utter carnage and tumult. I think that, anecdotally and also empirically when you looked at the polls, this is when Iran's ideology resonated the most for people, when there was the greatest amount of outrage and anger towards the US and Israel.

I think in the last two years the stabilisation, or the greater amount of stability in Iraq [Inaudible], the arrival of President Obama and the departure of Bush, you see that there's almost an inverse correlation between US popularity increasing - it certainly hasn't skyrocketed, but it's improved since President Bush left - and Iran's and Ahmadinejad's has gone down.

I think the other phenomenon to pay attention to is the rise of Turkey as someone who is now interested in becoming the regional actor, regional power in the Middle East, which really wasn't the case before the AKP party came to office.

When I think about it metaphorically, to compare Iran and Turkey's role in the Middle East, I oftentimes think that what Turkey has done over the course of the last decade is that they planted a lot of seeds in a lot of different countries, and they carefully water them and they cultivate them, and then reap the bloom, they reap the fruits. Arab foreign investment in Turkey has increased tenfold over the course of the last decade, which is pretty significant, and Erdogan has become the most popular politician in the Arab world. Turkish soap operas are very popular, and Turkey is feeling very proud of itself, in terms of their soft power in the region.

If you look at what Iran has done over the course of the last three decades, which, in my opinion, is that they've planted a lot of weeds throughout the region, and they tend to water them with a fire-hose, and so they have a lot of... they have Hezbollah and they have Hamas, and they have Islamic Jihad, but this hasn't produced any Arab foreign investment in Iran, minimal Arab foreign investment in Iran. Meanwhile, in all this international fora you have Arab leaders who are telling the Americans: you need to be tougher on Iran.

Some of the Gulf countries even are saying: you need to bomb Iran, and so, yes, you have a certain fringe of the population, in places like Cairo and Damascus and Oman, who hate the United States and hate Israel and they like Ahmadinejad, but if you're Iran that's not really something that you can hang your hat on. I don't think you get tremendous return on investment there.

FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you, Karim. Let me open the floor for questions. I see we have a gentleman at the front. If you can kindly introduce yourself?

DAVID WOLFE: Yes, thank you, I'm David Wolfe of the Oppenheimer Institute for Science. I was wondering whether you might know that if there is still nuclear cooperation with either Pakistan or North Korea, and there has not been much discussion on what the sanctions have done, in terms of affecting the policies of Iran particularly in terms of its nuclear infrastructure. Although you mentioned very much that the IAEA is there of course; under this new director there's a lot more antagonism between the IAEA and the Iranians. Can you...?

FABRICE POTHIER: Do you mind, Roger, if we take it by a group of two? Yes, the gentleman at the front.

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YVES MOLLARD LA BRUYERE: My name is Yves Mollard La Bruyère from the European Commission. I assist on Chatham House Rule inside Europe for protecting [Inaudible] my institution.

I appreciate the first reference to the obsession in Iran as a... I wondered whether it is honest or even correct to mention, as you did, the arguments which are very well known; for example, the fact that Israel is a nuclear power, the fact that the US was the only country to use nuclear bombs against a human population, arguments against the fact that Iraq and Afghanistan have been both invaded by the Americans, that there is more than 50 years of interference from the western powers in Iran, and that now we have more than seven years of discussions on possible strikes against Iran.

I wondered whether it is really folklore or something which has to be just mentioned for the game. My perception is that those arguments are absolutely decisive in the perception not only of the Iranian leadership on the western countries, but from the population also.

To maybe add some elements to this conviction, you mentioned the fact that the population of Iranians is massively against the present regime - I don't remember the name of the poll society who organised that one a year ago, it is a very famous poll organisation which is used very often by United Nations, it was used [Inaudible] EU institution, to organise polls before or after elections, when we have to monitor elections. The result of this poll shows that between 60% and 70%, 65% of the Iranians considered that the election was fair, that Ahmadinejad is their president, and that his election was legitimate. It is maybe something which is folklore, but it is one of the most impressive polls, scientific [Inaudible] of that.

I have another point, the US Congress decided to finance a covert operation against Iran last year, one year and a half ago. In the whole [Inaudible] the US, such a decision by a foreign country would be crazy - you know that perfectly well, but the Americans do it openly, and we still have the experience that may be a folklore the Europeans would even have to take into account.

The last word I would add, to finish, is the question of vocabulary. It is very, very often mentioned, as it has been said today once more, as it could be a reality that the Iranian leaders very often propose annihilation of Israel or annihilation of maybe the western countries, or something like that. When you look at what they said, they never mention such words; they always mention annihilate or get rid of serious situations, which is completely different.

My question, in one word, is: to what extent the question of Iran today is a question concerning the nuclear question, is a question of regime change, or is it a question, internal and domestic question, inside our western society?

FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you, and the lady in the middle.

SABINE MEYER: Sabine Meyer, advisor for the Green Group in the European Parliament. I have three short questions, I hope. One is: based on what Khamenei's son being promoted in August; is there any chance for a hereditary dictatorship in Iran? We have other examples right now of very good Iranian friends, like Sri Lanka or North Korea, for example.

Another question is: the economic decay - how much might there be a natural disaster, if you want, on the economic front? We haven't really gone into the economic situation in Iran right now.

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My third remark: you are mentioning a lot of neighbours, but Iraq, which might be the most important one, in terms of size and development, you are not mentioning it. [Inaudible] might be a problem with the former government, or what is the relationship, and how do you see that in the future?

FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you very much. We are going to address those questions; so we had a question about the nuclear cooperation between Iran and Pakistan and North Korea. Also, I think I will group your last question with a precedent one about sanctions: how do they affect the economic and political situation inside Iran?

Then we had a broad question made of a lot of different points, but the bottom line was: are we after the nuclear question, or is it more fundamental, about changing the regime in Iran? Then, finally, the question of promotion of Khamenei's son.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: Do you want to start, Roger?

ROGER COHEN: Yes, there's a lot there. On sanctions and the economy, I think Iran has been looking at sanctions for decades now. It's like trying to introduce a virus into a body that has been thoroughly inoculated. As you know, in Dubai some estimate is 30% of the Dubai economy is Iran-related. You close down one front company, the Rev Guards open up another one.

I'm essentially very sceptical on sanctions; I think carrots and sticks, as I said, are a lousy stew. I was interested, as I said, in the Turkish-Brazilian offer, which went nowhere, just because, I think, we're dealing with a psychosis, we're dealing with two peoples, United States and Iran, and those are the key players, who just have forgotten how to communicate with each other.

Nick Burns at the State Department, who led Iran negotiations which didn't happen, but who was in charge of Iran policy for a while, told me, look, there's a whole generation of State Department employees who have no dealing with Iran, nothing. I think these are the toughest sanctions that have been enacted so far. I think there's now no daylight, or very little, between Europe and the United States, especially after what happened in the summer.

Do I think sanctions are a behaviour-changing mechanism? No. Do I think the Iranian economy is going to collapse? I'm not an expert, and I haven't been there, because now journalists have all been barred, pretty much, but I think it's a fairly elastic, resilient, large economy, with many borders, with oil, and it's largely immune to this. I think the economy is hurting, but I don't think it's on the brink of collapse, is what I would say on that.

On Iraq - your question, Sabine - I think Iraq is one area where, in theory, the United States and Iran, surprisingly, could cooperate. Neither power wants Iraq to fall apart, both have some interest in stable governance. Iran has developed considerable trade with Iraq over the past five years, along with Turkey, very fast-growing areas. I think Iran's been showing some restraint in Iraq, as it has in Afghanistan. I think that's partly because it's more fragile, as we've been saying, and it doesn't want to rock the boat. In theory, both Iraq and Afghanistan, where, again, there are similar US and Iranian interests, could be areas where, if somebody was being creative, you might be able to begin a discussion there.

One thing that I'm sure about is: taking the nuclear in isolation is the wrong way to deal with Iran. It's insulting to the Iranians, it's a very difficult dossier, you've got decades of mistrust; you need to deal with Iran in a much broader framework, taking the whole security of the area into consideration.

Yes, I found your question a little confusing; there was a lot of folklore in there and I wasn't quite sure what was supposed to be folklore and what wasn't, but insofar as I understood it, I would say one thing: I don't see any difference between a Zionist regime and Israel; it is simply the term that Ahmadinejad and others choose to refer to Israel, because they don't want to pronounce the word Israel. Fair enough, if that's what they want to say – fine, but I don't see any big distinction between Zionist regime and Israel. In fact, you said we alluded to the annihilation of Israel; I don't think either of us had actually alluded to that.

Whatever the precise wording, I think that the president did say – and Karim probably knows this better than me – but something to the effect of the Zionist regime disappearing from the map. If you believe Zionist regime is something other than Israel, then maybe you could enlighten us.

Whether... Yes, the history is difficult, I agree with you about that; the history is very poisonous on both sides; and I think I agree with you to some extent, as I said earlier, about the way this nuclear threat... I wrote a column about a year and a bit ago called Israel Cries Wolf, and it infuriated a lot of people, but it just went over the various dates that Israel had over the last quarter century set for the moment when Iran would have a bomb, and it doesn't.

I don't think that President Obama is seeking the overthrow; in fact, I'm sure he's not. He addressed President Khamenei, he wanted to engage with Iran. I think there's a strong determination on the part of western countries to stop Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, if that is indeed Iran's goal, but I don't think that there is a strong or muscular effort, or a concerted effort to bring about the overthrow of Islamic republic, no.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: The question about Khamenei's son – I don't see that as a strong likelihood. I would go so far as to say that I think that, depending on when Khamenei eventually dies, and he's 71-years old, as well as rumours that he suffers from prostate cancer, I'm not sure if the position of Supreme Leader will die with him as well. That's, I think, within the realm of possibilities, but I don't see it as a strong possibility that his son could emerge, no matter what he wants.

With regards to the economy, I think the economy is having a lot of difficulties. It's difficult to discern whether the difficulties are more a result of sanctions or the profound mismanagement. I would make the argument that the greatest weapon of mass destruction to this economy is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; his veneer, his policies have promoted capital flight, have repelled foreign investment, and have been far more detrimental to Iran than the sanctions.

The reality is that, as long as oil prices remain even above \$40 a barrel, I think the regime can continue to muddle along; now they're over \$70. There's a great deal of malaise, there's a lot of unemployment, and more than unemployment, and Roger's seen firsthand in Iran, which is quite disheartening, is underemployment: the number of educated engineers and architects who are selling pizzas and driving taxis. I don't see that economy of collapse, because they do have this oil really to work with.

With regards to Iraq, I would make a couple of points on Iraq; one is that what Iran has done in Iraq has been to plant many seeds throughout the country and support many groups, from Shiite radicals, like Moqtada al-Sadr, to more secular jihads, like Ahmed Chalabi, to Kurdish groups, to even Sunni groups. It's almost the equivalent of a gambler who goes to Vegas and bets on every number of the roulette wheel, because in a way they want everyone beholden to them in Iraq, and they've pursued a somewhat similar strategy in Afghanistan.

I just would make this point, though, that there's a saying that the British Foreign Office has, that that the only two countries in which the diplomats don't get clientele, meaning they don't become even more sympathetic to the governments in which they're serving, are Iran and Russia, meaning that the more they are exposed to the officials of these countries, the less sympathetic they are to them. I think we've seen this phenomenon happen in Iraq, that the more Iraqis, and southern Iraqis, and Shiite Iraqis have been exposed to the culture of the Islamic republic and Iranian officials, the less enthralled they are with that Iranian influence in their country.

Now, there was a question about Pakistan and North Korea, their cooperation with Iraq, and the sanctions. We can only speculate, but what I've been told in recent weeks is that it's so difficult now – Iran's relations with European countries, and even the trade with the Emirates, and the banking restrictions have made them much more reliant on underground economy, but also underground nuclear dealings. I've been told even that the Chinese are trying to cut down on the North Korean equipment transfers to Iran, because the North Koreans have to fly over Chinese airspace. Likewise, I've been told that that trading of that... the days of Qadeer Khan being very easily allowed to transport these items to Iran is more difficult. I think that it's not as easy for them as it was before, but if you have lots of money to work with, I think there's always a price for everything.

In the end, I think my position on sanctions is that this regime has long shown themselves willing to subject their population to severe economic hardship rather than compromise on their political and ideological goals, so I don't see sanctions compelling them to moderate their nuclear behaviour. I think they feel they can weather the sanctions storm as long as oil prices remain above \$30, \$40. I do think you could argue that sanctions can possibly play a role in slowing down their progression to a nuclear weapons capability.

Lastly, about the Iranian public opinion, etc – have you been to Iran before?

YVES MOLLARD LA BRUYERE: Yes.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: I can tell you personally, when I talk to my family members in Iran, they're terrified of talking about politics over the phone, with their own family member, so the notion that perfect strangers can call Iran and get Iranians to speak openly over the phone about very sensitive political matters shows a fundamental lack of understanding of contemporary Iran. You would never trust an opinion poll in North Korea, you would never trust an opinion poll in other dictatorial regimes, so I think taken at face value, an opinion poll in Iran is quite naïve, to be frank.

Let's look at this election again; you have the Supreme Leader, who claims recently he's God and the Prophet's representative on earth, who publicly endorses the president; you have this election which is overseen by the Guardian Council. Ayatollah Jannati, the head of the Guardian Council, publicly endorses Ahmadinejad before the elections. You have the elections administered by the Interior Ministry; the head of the Interior Ministry, Sadegh Massouli, is an appointee of President Ahmadinejad, publicly endorses him. Already it's almost a joke to talk about it as an election, as if this was carried out freely and fairly.

Then you have the day of June 15th, and I encourage you to go watch the YouTube video from that day, which Roger is talking about, in which you have, in my opinion, one of the largest spontaneous protests in recent human history, not even in recent history, but recent human history, when 3 million people spontaneously take to the streets to protest their right for free election. As you said, for each person who was out on the streets, I can tell you there are many more at home who felt solidarity with them, who are afraid to go out into the streets.

I sometimes think what more do you want as evidence that this election was conducted under an enormous cloud of improprieties? I think, quite frankly, when you take the argument that everything is fine in Iran, this regime has tremendous popular support, and therefore we should just engage them and do a deal with them, you really undermine your policy prescriptions.

I would argue, the more prudent task, if indeed you want to argue for a policy of continued engagement and dialogue, which both of us have sat here and advocated, it's the same as...

YVES MOLLARD LA BRUYERE: Sir, your answer is already changed, not nuclear question.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: No, not at all. You obviously haven't been listening to anything I've been saying...

YVES MOLLARD LA BRUYERE: [Inaudible] any military strength is [Inaudible].

FABRICE POTHIER: Yes, we have three more questions, and then I'm quite keen on taking more questions before, but...

ROGER COHEN: I didn't say anything about that at all.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: I think that you really confuse two points; let me make this very clear to you, that those of us who believe that there is an enormous will, an oasis, a will for change in Iran, are almost unequivocally opposed to military action in Iran, because we argue that that would actually wheel the country off in a different course, and would actually prolong the shelf-life of this regime indefinitely.

Those of us, again, who argue that there is a vibrant movement for change in Iran, the vast majority, especially the people on the streets of Tehran and the leadership of the opposition movement are very much opposed to military action, because we think that that would kill the prospects of change. I would just leave it there, but I encourage you to go and watch those videos of the popular protests in Iran.

FABRICE POTHIER: I have three questions, and I'm keen on taking those, but if you could try to keep it to one question each so at least Roger and Karim have the chance to reach their final comments. The gentlemen in the blue shirt, and then I have [Inaudible],

DOMINIC PORTER: Thanks very much. I'm Dominic Porter; I work for the EU on Iran, amongst other things. One of the things that we face as we try to defuse tensions, if that's the right word, with Iran in our relationship, is the paradox that you both alluded to, which is that it's built in the DNA of the leadership now, the anti-American, anti-Western, increasingly so, yet at the same time you mentioned that the biggest prize, if you like, that nobody wanted, for example, a victorious Mousavi to have would be reconciliation between Iran and the United States. That's the paradox, if you like, at the heart of our attempt to deal with Iran.

The point to make to my question, as somebody from the EU, given the supreme role of the US in this relationship: is there anything the EU can do? Does Iran give a damn about the EU, for example, opening a delegation in Tehran? Is that completely legitimate [inaudible]? Would Iranian negotiations with Representative Ashton be simply either gaming for time, or potentially meaningful and opening up a tractable reconciliation?

FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you. [Inaudible], you have a question?

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UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Yes, thank you. Karim, you remember it was almost impossible to find anyone in Iran who didn't want the bomb a few years ago, from all walks of life, probably because they wanted to be respected, considered on the big countries. Now, I wonder if that has changed since the elections; I'd be interested to have your view.

Also, the Green Movement – is there a unifying line at least, on the bomb, for example: no, the Green Movement doesn't want the bomb? I'm sure the answer is no, but it'd be interesting to hear it from you.

In the same line, Roger, you once wrote an article, evoking, I think, an imaginary scenario, that, okay, Iran has the bomb, so what's going to happen? Did you, or am I dreaming this?

ROGER COHEN: Probably, I remember saying the same.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Well, it was very interesting, because, so what if Iran does have the bomb?

FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you. The next one, yes.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE SPEAKER: Thank you, my name is [Inaudible], working for the European Commission, but not on Europe. My question is with regard to the policy of the western world, with regard to Iran, and I'm wondering whether we are shooting our own foot if the strength of Iran, as you said, is relatively modest, if it is a little bit a hyped-up danger? Aren't we then giving certain parts of the world the possibility to use Iran as an instrument, to show that the policy of the western world is full of hypocrisy and therefore you are measuring these double standards?

I think what happened recently in the General Assembly, three theoretical options were put on the table, and all the ambassadors of the western world went along. I don't think that the message will be received in a very... as you said, that the people in Iran are not happy about it. I think it will be seen in certain part of the world: the West doesn't even want to listen to certain visions; they don't really want to talk. I think the way the Brazil-Turkey's initiative was handled is also giving a very important signal.

I think that the UN sanctions, that we have increased these sanctions, autonomous sanctions, so broken a little the uniformity of the UN, is a very important message. I think the risk that I see a little bit is that Iran will be used as an instrument to undermine in a world where the power structure, the division of power is changing considerably, that Iran will be used as an instrument to undermine the authority of the western world.

FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you. Stanley, do you want a very, very small type of question, or is that going to be long?

STANLEY CROSSICK: Actually, it's going to be a short comment; I'll try and be very short.

FABRICE POTHIER: Just one question, please.

STANLEY CROSSICK: I declare an interest in Iran under the old regime, but [Inaudible] same. I acted as a lawyer, both negotiating for and against Iranians and it taught me a great deal, but it seems to me that what is behind a great deal of the problem, and many others, is we continue to try to analyse Iran in a western sentiment. Underlying it, in my view, the negotiating tactic of Iran, on anything of Iranian, is confusion: you confuse the other side and you pick your way through. Would you agree with that?

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FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you very much. Roger, shall we start with you, and then, Karim, you have the final words?

ROGER COHEN: Yes. On the EU, and opening an EU delegation in Tehran – I don't think it's going to be a game-changer. I don't see any harm in Ashton having some talks, but again, the real game is Iran-US. If Solana of course tried for many years, with a different kind of US administration...

Europe's important to Iran, especially financially, economically, and I think if European nations are tightening up sanctions, Iran feels that. In terms of Iranian pride, going back to that, I think it's significant. I think, in the end, the EU's role here has to be complementary; the real issue is US-Iran, and I don't think anything Madam Ashton could do would change that.

Do Iranians want a bomb? Officially, nobody in Iran wants a bomb, of course. That's what the president says, that's what Khamenei... nobody in authority has ever said outright and clearly: we plan to build a nuclear bomb.

I think Iranians feel they have a right to develop nuclear energy, and they feel there are double standards in the world, so in a sense, I feel that the nuclear programme - and immense efforts have gone into this, it's... I was talking to a mullah in Tehran who told me that during his training in Qom they had nuclear scientists come in and explain the nuclear programme, and then all these mullahs were sent out to mosques in little villages, to talk about the nuclear programme. It's become a little bit like oil in the 1950s; it's a matter of national pride; so in that sense, I think it's something that Iranians feel an attachment to. It's nuclear power, it's mastering the technology; I don't think Iranians, in their majority or in vast numbers, think to themselves: we must have a bomb.

What if Iran had a bomb? Well, I'd rather Iran didn't a bomb, that there were not proliferation. I don't think that would be a good thing; I don't [sic] think that it would make the Middle East more unstable. I think what I wrote, if I wrote anything, is that if you put a gun to my head and say, between bombing Iran and Iran developing a bomb, I think bombing Iran would be an absolutely uncontrollable disaster whereas I think Iran with a bomb could probably be contained. If I had a gun to my head, and as an op-ed columnist, and I have to come down one side or the other, and do so in public, I'd probably come down here; but I think every effort should be made to persuade Iran that making a bomb is not in its interests or the region's interests.

Then, yes, your point, sir – I think you're completely right; one of the reasons I thought that the cavalier dismissal of what President Lula and Erdogan put together was so unfortunate, is that, hey, Brazil and Turkey are important countries in the world in which we are moving into. The world is changing, power is shifting, and the years since the meltdown of 2008 have only accentuated that. President Lula is leaving office with 80% popularity; Brazil has exploded onto the world scene, and Turkey, as Karim was saying earlier, is... We gave a hell of a signal to all of these countries.

After all, President Obama had stood up in his first speech at the United Nations and said, yes, we're in a changing world, but change must come with responsibility. China, India, Brazil, BRIC countries, Turkey – you must take your responsibilities. Then he sends a letter to them in which he outlines what the United States is looking for in this field; so quite aside from the actual content of the deal and the debate as to whether there was something to work on there or not - and it was immediately dismissed by Secretary Clinton - I think the message sent, and reinforced now by the United Nations, as you know, the message sent to the emerging powers was the worst possible message you could imagine. If Obama really wants buy-in from the

emerging powers, in terms of responsibility-taking, then he should find a way to handle what happened in Tehran back in April in a different way.

Finally, on confusion, yes, that brief negotiation I described left me quite confused, and it's definitely an element in which Iranians are very much at home; and we call it ambiguity, call it confusion - this is an element Iran navigates extremely effectively, but it doesn't do so, as Karim's been saying, in a cost-free way. All this confusion costs Iranians, costs Iran a huge amount.

It may be a satisfying game in some ways, in that Iran can say it's spun the world along for 20 years, but look at where Iran has gone, as Karim was saying latterly, and look at what... Iran could be Turkey on steroids! Imagine tourism in Iran, imagine the skiing industry in Iran, imagine the coastline, imagine Persepolis... this is a fantastic country which, alas, I fell in love with, and it could be so much more. Confusion plays into the whole mystique of Iran, but it'd be good to clear away some of that confusion and actually say, let's build something decent in this nation in the 21st century.

KARIM SADJADPOUR: Thank you, Roger. About the EU question - in the decade or so that I've been doing this stuff, what I find interesting is that a few years ago if I was having a conversation with a European diplomat, or certainly a Chinese or Russian diplomat, they would oftentimes be more critical of the US unwillingness to engage Iran than Iranian intransigence. They would complain that the US wants us to support sanctions or Security Council resolutions, but they really haven't made a good faith effort at diplomacy during the Bush administration.

What I find interesting now is that the space between the EU and the US is seemingly narrower than it's been since I've at least been doing this, and I think there's an appreciation that the Obama administration has made an effort to change the tone and context of the relationship. My sense is that the images which people saw on their television screens last summer throughout Europe, of people peacefully protesting and being brutalised, the image of Neda Agha-Soltan, has also somewhat changed the perceptions of Iran.

My sense is that the transatlantic position is closer than it's probably been in a long time of not ever... and if I had a suggestion, I would say that it's useful for the EU to keep a channel of communication open. Like Roger, I'm not optimistic that Lady Ashton and Mr Jalili are going to sign a peace accord any time soon, but that door of dialogue is open. I would argue I would like to see the EU be increasingly outspoken about condemning human rights issues, expressing solidarity for a reformist element, and it doesn't have the same cost as US support for these types of measure has. I think there's a real role for the EU to be played there.

About [Unidentified Female Speaker] question about popular opinion regarding a bomb, I think my own impression was that it oftentimes depended on who was asking that question; if a European or a non-Iranian asked Iranians whether they would want a bomb, there will oftentimes be this injured nationalistic reaction that: oh, you guys have it, or Pakistan has it, why shouldn't we have it?

I often found that when I would ask the question there was a great deal of ambivalence about popular support for nuclear weapons, for three reasons: one is that, that how many examples started to show the correlation between nuclear weapon and national pride is Pakistan and India. I think you have to look at it in the context of the rivalry between those two countries, that they were happy to show off against one another, but you look at the Iranian context and you say, well, our chief adversary, Saddam, has been eliminated, our government has big problems with the US and Israel, but we really don't; what is it we're trying to show off? That's one.

Second, this is a very war-fatigued society; they experienced an eight-year bloody war with Iraq, and I just found that very few people romanticise about the prospect of more militarization. I thought they are just tired of constantly reading about this nuclear issue in the headlines.

Third, and I think this point is more acute now than ever, there is a concern among many factions that if this particular cast of characters gets their hands on a bomb, it could further entrench their power; so there is concern that this would be an impediment to democratisation.

I have to say that, I made this point earlier today, too, that I think sometimes historians may look back ten, 15 years from now and say that this nuclear programme actually, ironically, expedited the Islamic republic's demise. What I mean by that is that the Soviet Union attacked Afghanistan and occupied Afghanistan in order to enhance its security, and what instead happened was that they bled themselves economically and it had enormous political cost for them. I look at Iran's nuclear programme and I see that it's had enormous political cost for them; it's had enormous economic cost for them – billions, tens of billions of dollars – and they haven't had one watt of energy in exchange for it.

What Roger said is absolutely right; I find it quite dispiriting that in other countries throughout the world, including developing countries, like India and China and elsewhere, there are debates about the environment, about educational policy, about all of these things that we're grappling with nowadays; and in Iran, this nuclear issue's taken up all of the national oxygen. I wonder, ten, 15, 20 years from now, if we look back and see that actually this nuclear programme was actually an albatross for them which expedited their demise.

Lastly, about the issue, the confusion and the difficulty of engaging or dialoguing or negotiating with Iran – one thing that Iranian officials will oftentimes say to me is that: the problem with America is that you usually change personnel every four years, a problem with democracies: once someone finally learns how to deal with Iran, they leave office, and then someone new comes to power, whereas Khamenei has been the Supreme Leader for 21 years, there's more continuity there.

Also, the issue is that when you're a democracy, negotiating with certainly a non-democracy, they can employ tactics which you can't employ. A very good example of this is these three hikers, who, I think it's now been proven that they weren't even in Iraqi... three US hikers that were brought from Iraqi Kurdistan and are basically now being used as hostages, which the regime is bartering with.

What do you do in that situation if you're the United States? The issue that Obama administration is grappling with is to say, okay, but if we hand over the Iranian arms traders who we have, that's going to incentivise them in the future to take even more of our citizens hostage for this bartering arrangement; but you want these freedom of these folks at the same time.

I think that is a dilemma which, and it's not unique to Iran or the United State; I think European countries who have their diplomats or their citizens taken hostage in parts of Africa or the Middle East or elsewhere all grapple with these dilemmas.

FABRICE POTHIER: Thank you very much, Karim. This was unusually late on schedule, but I think a captivating discussion. If you could join me to thank both Karim and Roger for sharing their thoughts on a very interesting topic – thank you very much.