



How to Love a Hard-Liner

The ski resort of Shemshak, just outside Tehran, is the last place you would expect to hear expressions of nationalist ardor. The slopes are filled with wealthy Iranians who sip hot chocolate in the shadow of a dazzling sun and spend most of their time gabbing about designer skiwear and which party to attend that evening. But when the subject of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad comes up between runs, the skiers get excited. "I couldn't be happier with him," says Mehdi, 19, an architecture major. "We just want our rights, and he defends them." His sister Anahita, 24, says she changed her mind about the President when he refused to abandon the country's nuclear-energy program. "He stood behind

his world like a man," she says. That an Islamic hard-liner has inspired such pride among even secular, Westernized Iranians says everything about the political climate in Iran today and shows how Ahmadinejad has transformed himself from a lightly regarded ideologue to a national hero. In recent months the President has used the escalating standoff over Iran's nuclear program as a platform for broadening his appeal at home, framing the West as an enemy bent on weakening Iran by denying it legitimate access to technology. Indeed, many observers believe that Ahmadinejad is reacting to the masses' increasingly assertive mood as much as he is stoking it. "Before, you had people vs. the regime," says a Western diplomat in Tehran. "Now you have Iran vs. the West."

INSPIRED Iranians bask in the sun at Shemshak ski resort

Many Iranians attribute their changed views to the realities of a changed Middle East. The late 1990s—when former President Mohammed Khatami led Iran with promises of tolerance and democracy—was a stable time when young Iranians clamored for more social and political freedoms. But now with neighboring Iraq in turmoil, Iranians seem more concerned with bolstering their place in the region than with freedom of expression. A growing sense of vulnerability is why many find it easy to ignore Ahmadinejad's fundamentalist outlook and provocative remarks and concentrate on his nationalist defiance. "I don't like this regime, but I don't think Iran should be weak either, or else we'll end up like Iraq," says Nazanin Arafin, 33, a teacher. "In the end, I'd rather be oppressed by an Iranian than a foreign occupier."

While he rallies supporters to back a more confrontational stance with the West, Ahmadinejad has soothed the anxieties of young Iranians, who initially feared he would crush their personal freedoms. Instead government meddling has been limited to blocking thousands of news and cultural websites. Some believe the regime will impose harsher social restrictions with time, but others argue Ahmadinejad will refrain altogether, to avoid alienating the majority of young people, among whom he is now popular. Young Iranians are excited to find a leader who lets them wear baggy jeans and pink veils, and

still stands up to what they consider a belligerent U.S. "Our civilization is far superior," says Vahid Mobaraki, 28, a gold merchant in the Tehran bazaar. "We don't need to be bossed around by a country with only 200 years of history."

By focusing public attention on the country's external adversaries, Ahmadinejad has sidestepped criticism for not addressing the country's internal social problems. Despite \$60-per-bbl. oil prices, 16% of Iranians remain unemployed. Zahra Rassai, 46, a mother of four teenage sons, voted for Ahmadinejad, hoping he would reduce college tuition. "Nothing has improved in my daily life, but that doesn't matter," she says. "If we Iranians rallied together and boycotted Western products, they wouldn't have the right to dictate to us." It's just as likely, though, that the nuclear dispute will produce pain for Iran, by discouraging foreign investment and pushing the country deeper into isolation. The few critics of Ahmadinejad's who are willing to speak openly say incendiary remarks have already slowed the Iranian economy, and fear that his hostile tactics will elicit economic sanctions and the world's condemnation rather than its respect. "In principle, what Ahmadinejad says is beautiful. It's too bad it's him saying it," says Kamyar Sharifi, 41, a radiator manufacturer. "And the disturbing thing is that it's all a show, because nothing here is improving." Unfortunately for regime opponents at home and abroad, few Iranians seem to have noticed. —By Azadeh Moaveni/Tehran

What Does Iran Want?

THAT DEPENDS ON WHOM YOU ASK. WHAT IS clear is that Iran has pursued a nuclear program for decades, ever since the U.S. first fed the Shah's appetite for reactors. Experts generally believe that Tehran has coveted the Bomb as well. Under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, signed by Iran in 1968, the country is legally entitled to build reactors and make enriched uranium fuel as a source of energy, as long as it abides by treaty rules and allows the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor what it is doing. Iran has consistently denied that it intends to scale up fuel-grade enriched uranium into the purer weapons-grade component of a bomb. Iranians say they have the same rights as other countries to technology and are just looking out for their long-term energy future.

The trouble is, almost no one believes that's all Iran is after. Iran had concealed clandestine efforts to make enriched uranium from IAEA inspectors for two decades, until its secret lab at Natanz was exposed by an exile opposition group in 2002. Iran eventually owned up to the deception, telling the IAEA that since the West had denied Iran reactors for decades, it had to go underground to become self-sufficient in fuel. The revelations led the IAEA to put seals on Iran's test centrifuges while Britain, France and Germany tried to negotiate guarantees that Iran's nuclear program could never be shifted to weapons production—an effort that the U.S. backed after initial hesitation. But those talks collapsed in January when Iran refused to abandon its insistence that it retain the rights to proceed with enrichment. The Iranians broke the seals on their most sensitive equipment and vowed to press ahead. According to diplomats and U.S. officials, experts from the IAEA have reported that Iran is on the verge of assembling and operating a 164-

centrifuge cascade, machinery that has peaceful applications but can also eventually be used to make fuel for a bomb. To this day, Iranian officials assert that their uranium-enrichment activities are purely for energy or research purposes rather than military ones. "There's no place for nuclear weapons in our national security doctrine," Larjani told TIME. He points out that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a fatwa forbidding the use of nuclear weapons. But such claims were undermined again in January when the IAEA reported an administrative link between a uranium-conversion program known as Green Salt and efforts to weaponize missiles that, for the first time, appeared to show an attempt to harness the nuclear program for military purposes.

Is Iran Close To Getting the Bomb?

NOT NECESSARILY. UNDERPINNING THE current air of crisis is uncertainty about how soon Iran could manage bomb production. Western intelligence on the intentions and capabilities of nuclear aspirants is notoriously unreliable. Thus far, the IAEA says, Iran has the knowledge but not the capacity to make weapons. Some experts say that if Iran's enrichment facilities became fully operational, they could churn out enough material to construct two bombs a year. John Negroponte, Director of National Intelligence, said recently that "Iran, if it continues on its current path, will likely have the capability to produce a nuclear weapon within the next decade." What is already worrisome is that once Iran has the fissile material to make a bomb, it would have ready ways to threaten to use it. In 2004 Iran unveiled the Shahab-3 missile, with a range long enough to reach Israel and southern Europe. At the military parade in which it was first shown, one of the missiles carried the scrawl WIPE ISRAEL OFF THE MAP!

For years Iran alternately hid its activities and negotiated with the West over their scope. Over the past three years, both sides have focused on rebuilding confidence rather than provoking confrontation, but those overtures have lately all but vanished amid Iran's increasingly provocative behavior.

NATANZ: FOR WATTAGE OR WEAPONS?

Iran claims it will use the unsealed facility (and two other locations) for peaceful R&D. The U.S. says Tehran is aiming to make bomb-grade uranium. The basis for suspicion:



Ardor – passion; fiery intensity of feeling.

Secular – worldly rather than spiritual; not specifically relating to religion.

Ideologue – an advocate of a particular ideology, belief, or set of beliefs.

Escalating – to increase, enlarge, or intensify.

Provocative – tending to provoke, anger, or stimulate.

Adversary – an opponent; an enemy.

Incendiary – stirs up arguments; inflames; an agitator.

Elicit – to call forth, draw out, or provoke (a reaction, for example).

Condemnation – an expression of strong disapproval; pronouncing as wrong.

Underpinning – support or foundation.

Aspirant – one who aspires, as to advancement, honors, or a high position; Seeking distinction or advancement.

Notoriously – known widely and usually unfavorably; infamous.

Fissile – capable of undergoing nuclear fission; possible to split.

Coveted – to wish for longingly.

Clandestine – kept or done in secret, often in order to conceal an illicit or improper purpose.

Fatwa – a legal opinion or ruling issued by an Islamic scholar.