

Voices from Tehran

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The United States administration is in a mood for confrontation with Iran. The Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, seems more than happy to oblige. His attitude alarms many Iranian leaders and journalists. But what of the people on the Tehran street?

The evidence of US military escalation in the region is clear. The deployment of a second aircraft-carrier in the Persian Gulf, the increased US troop strength in Iraq, the reported transfer of US fighter jets and Awacs aircraft in southern Turkey, and the supply of an air-defence battalion equipped with Patriot missile batteries to protect Gulf Arab allies - many in Iran see these steps as part of an ominous [1], choreographed preparation for war.

The pressure is diplomatic as well as military. The UN Security Council imposed sanctions [2] on Iran in December 2006 over its nuclear plans, and the February deadline for Iranian compliance is fast approaching. The European Union is no longer offering the opportunity for Iran to play its western interlocutors against each other - though (as Paul Rogers reports [3] in **openDemocracy**) Iran can look east and north for some comfort.

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All interviewees' names in this article have been changed

This, as well as more familiar national pride, confidence and ideological certitude, helps explain why Iran's response to American and UN pressure has so far been defiant. Tehran announced that it would press ahead with its uranium-enrichment programme [5] at its Natanz plant), while Ahmadinejad's rhetoric on his Latin American tour was characteristically uncompromising.

But all is not well among Iran's elite, far less among its long-suffering people. The tide of opinion is - very publicly - turning against [6] the president. While northern Tehran's wide, middle-class boulevards have never lacked harsh critics of the president, what is new is that attitudes here are beginning to acquire the smell of official sanction.

On 10 January, two Iran's newspapers - each a mouthpieces of the establishment - printed an article criticising the president. *Jomhuri-ye Islami* (which is said to reflect the views of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [7], himself) addressed the president thus: "One day you announce that we are installing 3,000 centrifuges, the next day you say 60,000. This gives the impression that what you say has not been well thought out".

Jomhuri-ye Islami went on to accuse Ahmadinejad of using the nuclear programme to disguise his government's failings with the country's economy: "Turning the nuclear issue into a propaganda slogan gives the impression that you, to cover up flaws in the government, are exaggerating its importance. If people get the impression that the government is exaggerating the nuclear case to divert attention from their demands, you will cause this national issue to lose public support".

The other sting came from *Hamshahri* (whose director, [Hossein Entezami](#) [8], is a member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team). The paper wrote: "At the very moment that the nuclear issue was about to move away from the UN Security Council, the fiery speeches of the president have resulted in the adoption of two resolutions".

The politicians were quick to join the bandwagon. In an unprecedented move on 14 January, 150 of the 290 members of the *majlis* (parliament) signed a letter holding the president responsible for Iran's [economic](#) [9] woes, which include raging inflation (running at around 20%), high unemployment and rocketing house prices. The letter - whose signatories included traditional allies of the president - also criticised Ahmadinejad's government for failing to deliver the budget on time.

Then, when the budget was delivered, another blow: within hours it was pulled apart by Seyyed Safdar Hoseni, who served as finance minister in the reformist [Mohammad Khatami's](#) [10] cabinet. Hoseyni's analysis of the figures (he told *Etemad*, a reformist newspaper) persuaded him that the government is trying to cover up the budget's true size.

Both the nuclear and the economic worries have encouraged some - Ebrahim Yazdi, leader of the Freedom Movement, is one - to call for Khatami and his predecessor as president, [Hashemi Rafsanjani](#) [11], to intervene. On 25 January, the reformist website Aftab reported that over 100 MPs had met Rafsanjani (now chair of the [Expediency Council](#) [12]) to this effect. Dariush Qanbari, a member of the *majlis* national-security committee, told an Aftab reporter that Rafsanjani voiced concern about the military threat while stressing that economic damage as a result of sanctions could be just as serious.

The reformist newspaper *Mardom-Salari*, also on 25 January, roasted the president, accusing him of using the media for propaganda purposes and - reminding its readers of his comprehensive defeat in the December 2006 [elections](#) [13] - criticised him for being out of touch with the public. It contrasted his indifference to mounting criticism of Iran in Arab states with his eagerness to solicit friendship with [Venezuela](#) [14].

These concerns over Iran's economy and political direction are reflected on the streets of Tehran. Ahmadinejad's approval rating (even as calculated by the state's television station) dipped to 35% in October 2006 and has not recovered. The state of the economy is uppermost in people's minds: the president was [elected](#) [15] in June 2005 on promises to improve living standards (falling for almost everyone, including the middle class) and battle corruption (still widespread). But the nuclear issue and the danger of war are also a factor. Ahmadinejad's honeymoon seems well and truly over.

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A souring mood

Many Iranians are aware that the country's official media underplay the gravity of the country's situation, and thus tune into (officially banned) satellite channels and access information on the internet. "I know what's going on", says Nazanin, a university student, "and I am scared. When will they attack us?"

"I believe that we have a right to nuclear energy", says Behrooz, a high-school student. "But if the world doesn't believe us, I don't think it is worth getting bombed over."

"At first I supported Ahmadinejad", says Bardieh, another university student. "But he has destroyed our reputation in the world with all this holocaust [23] nonsense. We are not anti-Semitic, even if we don't like Israel's politics. We have a tolerant culture, but now the world thinks we are Nazis. Is that why they hate us so much in America?"

Yassi, a young painter in Tehran, tries to be optimistic about the possibility of military action against Iran: "I hope it doesn't happen. But Americans are not knowledgeable about different cultures and Iran is one of them. If there was more contact between our cultures they could see that we are just human as they are, we have families that we love like they do, we have jobs, we have our own businesses, we travel, we are well educated ... like them! The youth of Iran is still suffering from the long war with Iraq and just want to make up for the years they have lost, that their families have lost. I just hope they realise that."

The concerns over the economy and the prospect of war are connected for Shahlah, a young housewife. "I have been buying in extra stores of rice", she says. "All my friends have. We don't know what will happen, so it's best to be prepared. But it seems like the prices are going up every day and there is always a reason ... every day our money is worth less."

People who have moveable assets are voting with their pockets - capital flight to Dubai is routine. Those on lower incomes try to survive, amid constant worries over rising prices for basic foodstuffs, rents and houses. One of them is Majid, an engineer. He pointed to a petrol-station queue in uptown Tehran: "Already the price of petrol is going up. My family in Kurdistan have told me it has tripled there. And now they have announced they will start rationing after *Nowruz* [Iran's new year, on 21 March]".

Farideh, a mother with two young children, worries about their future. "We don't know what to do, where to go. If there is a war, then I honestly don't know how Iran will ever recover. The happiest day of my life was when the war with Iraq war ended. I don't think I can bear to go through that again. But what choice do we have?"

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