



CRS Report for Congress

Iran: Profile of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

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Summary

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad was elected June 24, 2005, to a four-year term, becoming the first non-cleric president in 24 years. He defeated former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in a run-off. Prior to his 2005 election to the presidency, Ahmadinejad did not hold an elected office and was a virtual unknown in the international arena. This report covers his background; his victory over the well-known former president Rafsanjani; his remarks about the West, including Israel; and recent visits to Iraq and Latin America. For further information and analysis on Ahmadinejad, Iran, and U.S. options, see CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, by Kenneth Katzman. This report will be updated as warranted.

Background

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (pronounced mah-MOOD ah-mah-dih-nee-ZHAHD) was born in 1956 in the village of Aradan near the city of Garmsar, southeast of Tehran. The fourth son of seven children of an ironworker, he and his family moved to Tehran for better economic opportunity. Their move to Tehran coincided with the change of his family name. His family's original name was Saborjhian.¹ The family name change provides an insight into the devoutly Islamic working-class roots of Mr. Ahmadinejad's brand of populist politics. His solidarity with the most downtrodden is also believed to have been influenced by his father, Ahmad, who, after running a grocery store and then a barber shop in Aradan, became a blacksmith in Tehran.

¹ The name Saborjhian derives from thread painter — Sabor in Farsi — a once common and humble occupation in the carpet industry in Semnan province, where Aradan is situated. Ahmad by contrast is a name also used for prophet Muhammad and means virtuous; Nejad means race in Farsi, so Ahmadinejad can mean Muhammad's race or virtuous race. Robert Tait, "Humbling Beginning that Shaped Iran's New Hard Man: Ahmadinejad has Tasted the Poverty He Wants to Eradicate," *The Guardian* (Manchester, UK), July 2, 2005, p. 15.

Ahmadinejad holds a Ph.D. in traffic and transport engineering from Tehran University of Science and Technology.² He joined the revolutionary guards in 1986 after volunteering to serve in the war with Iraq. Reportedly, his Islamic credentials are said to be beyond challenge.³ He was co-founder of the Islamic Society of Students and has been an instructor for the Basij, the youth volunteer organization that enforces the Islamic Republic's strict religious mores. In the 1980s, he reportedly served as the governor of Maku and Khoy cities in the northwestern West Azerbaijan province for four years. He became an advisor to the governor general of the western province of Kurdistan for two years.⁴ In 1993, he was appointed as a governor general of the newly created northwestern province of Ardebil.

In May 2003, the Tehran City Council (TCC), which was dominated by conservatives when reformist voters did not turn out in large numbers in 2003 municipal elections, appointed Ahmadinejad mayor of Tehran, Iran's capital city of 12 million people. As mayor, he sought to improve local services, repair roads, and upgrade a chaotic traffic system. A former military figure, he also promised to step up efforts to counter western "decadence" to build a powerful modern Islamic Iran.⁵

Election and Its Aftermath

Prior to his 2005 election to the presidency, Ahmadinejad never held an elected office and was virtually unknown in the international arena. Nevertheless, in a campaign promising anti-corruption, more economic support to the poor, and maintaining the principles of the revolution espoused by the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Ahmadinejad won the presidency in a run-off against former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani on June 24, 2005. Ahmadinejad then became the first non-cleric president of Iran in 24 years.

Ahmadinejad's rise to power and landslide victory surprised the international community, including many Iranian specialists who anticipated a Rafsanjani victory. Approximately 22 million people voted in the run-off poll, which had a turnout of 60%. He received around 62% of the vote, nearly twice that of his rival, Rafsanjani, who received 35.9% of the vote.⁶

Under the Iranian constitution, the president is elected for a four-year term by direct vote of the people and his re-election for a successive term is permissible only once. For

² Military Section: Profile on Mahamoud Ahmadinejad at GlobalSecurity.org at [<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/ahmadinejad.htm>], accessed on June 12, 2008.

³ Robert Tait, "Pious populist ... presidential?," *The Guardian* (Manchester, UK), June 25, 2005.

⁴ Military Section: Profile on Mahamoud Ahmadinejad, at GlobalSecurity.org at [<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/ahmadinejad.htm>].

⁵ Amin Saikal, "A Hard-liner, for a Change Iran's President-elect," *International Herald Tribune*, June 28, 2005.

⁶ BBC News, "Iran Loser Blasts 'Illegal' Poll, Defeated Iranian Presidential Candidate Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has Reacted Angrily to His Surprise Loss to Hardline Opponent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad," June 25, 2005, at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4622955.stm].

instance, Ayatollah Khameni, Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Mohammad Khatami were all elected for two consecutive terms.

Denial of the Holocaust

Since taking office in August 2005, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has made a series of remarks about Israel, Jews, and the Holocaust. On October 26, 2005, speaking to a student conference in Tehran in a speech entitled, "World without Zionism," he said,

"Some European countries insist on saying that during World War II, Hitler burned millions of Jews and put them in concentration camps. Any historian, commentator or scientist who doubts that is taken to prison or gets condemned ... Let's assume what the Europeans say is true ... Let's give some land to the Zionists in Europe or in Germany or Austria. They faced injustice in Europe, so why do the repercussions fall on the Palestinians?" Most Jews in Israel "have no roots in Palestine, but they are holding the destiny of Palestine in their hands and allow themselves to kill the Palestinian people."⁷

On December 8, 2006, Ahmadinejad reportedly said that "Today, they have created a myth in the name of Holocaust and consider it to be above God, religion and the prophets ... If you (Europeans) committed this big crime, then why should the oppressed Palestinian nation pay the price? You have to pay the compensation yourself. This is our proposal: give a part of your own land in Europe, the United States, Canada or Alaska to them so that the Jews can establish their country."⁸ Furthermore, at his urging, on December 11, 2006, the Institute for Political and International Studies, an arm of the Foreign Ministry, held a two-day conference entitled, "Review of the Holocaust: Global Vision." He addressed the conference as did other Holocaust deniers, such as former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke and French professor Robert Faurisson; Nazi sympathizers; and anti-Zionists such as British Rabbi Ahron Cohen.

Trips to Latin America

On January 13, 2007, Ahmedinejad arrived in Caracas, Venezuela, to begin his Latin American tour. Reportedly, his intent of the four-day visit to the region was to seek and cultivate stronger political and economic ties to his Latin American allies. While in Caracas, he met his counterpart, President Hugo Chavez, whom Ahmadinejad called a "brother" during his first visit to Venezuela, in September 2006.⁹

For his part, President Chavez has become a leading defender of Iran's nuclear ambitions, charging the United States with using the issue as a cover to attack a regime it opposes and promised to stand with Iran. The two countries also signed a commercial agreement that sees the two countries developing an international oil company.

⁷ *Associated Press*, "Ahmadinejad's Recent Comments on Israel and the Holocaust," December 14, 2005.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Agence France Presse*, "Iran President Tours Latin America Bolstering Anti-US Ties," January 13, 2007.

Ahmadinejad also met the newly elected Nicaraguan president, Daniel Ortega. The two countries signed a development agreement largely targeting Nicaragua's economic and infrastructure problems. It called for the construction of dams and homes, and factories building items from buses to bicycles. They also agreed to establish programs to improve drinking water, ports, and the fishing industry. On January 15, 2007, Ahmadinejad attended the inauguration ceremony of Ecuador's new president, Rafael Correa, and met with Bolivian leader Evo Morales. All are vocal critics of President Bush.¹⁰

U.N. Sanctions

In response to U.N. sanctions in 2006 and 2007, Ahmedinejad, on April 18, 2007, stated that Iran's army was self-sufficient and would not be weakened by the sanctions.¹¹ He also described the countries that drew up the sanctions as "bullying powers." The sanctions were imposed by the U.N. Security Council after Iran refused to halt uranium enrichment in order to appease Western concerns about its nuclear program.¹²

Canceled U.N. Trip

On March 23, 2007, the Voice of America (VOA) reported that Ahmadinejad had called off his trip to New York to attend a critical U.N. Security Council meeting. Iranian officials said the trip was canceled because the United States issued visas too late. However, State Department officials said all 75 visas for Ahmadinejad, his security detail, flight crew, and other officials were approved and handed over to Iranian representatives in Switzerland on March 23, 2007.¹³ Even though some of the applications for the visas were incomplete, all visas for the delegation were reportedly approved.

Release of the British Sailors

On March 23, 2007, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRG) captured 15 British sailors and marines who were inspecting ships in the Persian Gulf. The crew was conducting searches near the demarcation line that separates the territorial waters of Iran and Iraq. Iranians claimed that the sailors and marines had "invaded" Iranian waters and demanded an apology, while Britain maintained that the crew members were well within Iraqi waters and demanded their unconditional release.¹⁴

¹⁰ "Iran leader Courts Latin America Allies," *Boston Globe*, at [http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2007/01/15/iran_leader_courts_latin_america_allies], accessed on June 12, 2008.

¹¹ "Ahmadinejad Says Sanctions Will Not Harm Iran's Army," *Belfast Telegraph*, April 18, 2007, p.1.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "Ahmadinejad Calls Off Trip to US," *Voice of America News*, March 23, 2007.

¹⁴ John Ward Anderson, "Iran Releases 15 Captive Britons: Naval Crew Said to Be Headed Home, Bringing Tense Standoff to a Close," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, April 5, 2007, p. A1.

On April 4, 2007, Ahmadinejad announced that his government would release the 15 detained British sailors and marines as an “Easter season gift to the British people.” The crew left for London on April 5, 2007, onboard a commercial airline.

Nuclear Activity

On August 28, 2007, in a lengthy news conference from Tehran, Ahmadinejad said that, contrary to recent news reports, Tehran has not slowed its nuclear activity. Ahmedinejad also warned Iran would respond if the United States went ahead with plans to label the Revolutionary Guards a terrorist organization.¹⁵ On November 7, 2007, while addressing thousands of Iranians gathered in Birjand, in eastern Iran, Ahmadinejad claimed that his country has now reached a key nuclear target of operating 3,000 centrifuges for enriching uranium. His claim, however, contradicted the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report drawn up by IAEA Chief Mohamed El-Baradei; the agency put the number of centrifuges working in Natanz at close to 2,000 with another 650 being tested.¹⁶

At the U.N. General Assembly

On September 25, 2007, addressing the U.N. General Assembly on Iran’s nuclear activities, Ahmadinejad said, “The issue of Iran’s nuclear activities is a matter only for the United Nations atomic watchdog now and not the Security Council.”¹⁷ He further stated that “arrogant powers” were abusing the Security Council to prevent Iran enjoying its rights and entitlements. He went on to say, “Previously, they illegally insisted on politicizing the Iranian nation’s nuclear case, but today, because of the resistance of the Iranian nation, the issue is back to the IAEA, and I officially announce that in our opinion the nuclear issue of Iran is now closed and has turned into an ordinary Agency matter.”¹⁸

Much of his speech at the General Assembly seems to have been dedicated to criticism of what he calls “certain powers.”¹⁹ According to Ahmadinejad, these “certain powers” were responsible for many of the world’s problems. “These powers routinely breached human rights despite claiming to be exclusive advocates of those rights; aggressively attacked indigenous cultures and national values; promoted lewdness and violence; perpetuated gross economic imbalances between countries; violated rules of

¹⁵ “Ahmadinejad: Iranian Nuclear Program Not Slowed,” Voice of America, August 28, 2007, [<http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2007-08/2007-08-28-voa55.cfm?CFID=155081018&CFTOKEN=55454177>].

¹⁶ Ali Akbar Dareini, “3,000 Uranium Centrifuges Fully Working, Iran says,” *USA Today*, November 7, 2007.

¹⁷ “Iranian President Tells General Assembly that Nuclear Issue is Now Closed,” U.N. News Service, September 25, 2007, at [<http://www.un.org/apps/news/printnewsAr.asp?nid=23969>].

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

international law and disrespected their global commitments; and escalated the arms race.”²⁰

Reportedly, the September 24, 2007, discussions between the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Ahmedinejad were primarily focused on nuclear and Afghan issues. In the meeting, the Secretary General pressed Ahmadinejad to comply fully with the work plan Iran recently reached with the IAEA and to contribute toward the implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions regarding its nuclear activities.

Recent Developments

On March 2-3, 2008, Ahmadinejad visited Baghdad. The visit was the first by a regional head of state to visit Baghdad since the 2003 American occupation of Iraq. While on his two-day visit, he announced \$1 billion in export credits for Iranian goods to Iraq as well as a series of trade pacts with his “brotherly” neighbor.²¹

On May 8, 2008, while addressing the Iranian Parliament, Ahmedinejad lambasted the 60th anniversary of the creation of the state of Israel. He called Israel a “stinking corpse” and said that “those who think they can revive the corpse of this fabricated and usurper regime are mistaken.”²² He went on to say that “If any regional countries assist the Zionist regime, they will burn in fire arising from nations’ hatred.”²³ Reportedly, he added, “Today the reason for Zionist regime’s existence is questioned, and this regime is on its way to annihilation.”²⁴

On his first visit to Western Europe on June 2, 2008, Iran’s President Ahmedinejad received a frosty welcome after offending Israel on the eve of his departure to Rome for the U.N. food summit on rising food prices.²⁵ Before his departure to Rome, he said, “Israel would soon disappear off the map and the ‘satanic power’ of the United States would be destroyed.”²⁶ He added, “This will happen whether we are involved in it or not.”²⁷

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Big Brother Comes to Town: Iraq and Iran,” *The Economist*, London, March 8, 2008, p.71.

²² “Ahmedinejad Calls Zionist Regime a Stinking Corpse,” *Islamic Republic News Agency*, May 8, 2008.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Nazila A. Fathi, “Iran: A Hate Note on Israel’s Birthday,” *The New York Times*, May 9, 2008.

²⁵ Silvia Aloisi, “Ahmedinejad, Mugabe Given Cold Shoulders at Summit,” *Boston Globe*, June 3, 2008.

²⁶ Phil Stewart, “Ahmedinejad: Israel to Vanish With or Without Iran,” *Reuters*, June 3, 2008.

²⁷ Ibid.