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## Truths in Tehran

What the Wikileaks cables really tell us about Iran.

Abbas Milani December 16, 2010 | 12:00 am



Most of the talk about Iran and the Wikileaks documents has centered around the revelation—hardly a surprise—that Arab states are wary of Iran’s nuclear program. This is indeed an important story: The depth of the fear from Egypt, Oman, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia is striking (in one document we learn that, in 2009, Saudi Arabia promised Morocco discounted oil if it joined in the effort to contain Iran). And even Syria, usually seen as Iran’s most stalwart ally in the Arab world, is apparently beginning to get worried about Iran (“Alarm bells are ringing even in Damascus,” an American official is informed in one Wikileaks document). Yet the information about Iran contained in the cables is hardly confined to this one issue. As I read some of the documents over the past few weeks, I found a few noteworthy items that have yet to get the attention they deserve:

**Even before the June 2009 protests, the regime was extraordinarily sensitive about the possibility of popular unrest.**

On February 4, 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei pulled the plug on a plan to give a U.S. badminton team visas to visit Tehran. Iran had demanded that “no public announcements would be made until after the team’s arrival in Iran.” This way, it hoped to “maintain full control of media coverage of the event,” and “avoid a replay of the 1998 U.S. wrestling team visit, when Iranian crowds were filmed waving American flags and cheering the U.S. team.” When news of the badminton team’s planned trip was reported in the press, Khamenei saw a conspiracy and ordered the trip cancelled. The fact that Khamenei was anxious about the visit of a badminton team suggests just how much the Iranian government fears its own people.

**Khamenei may be ill—and Rafsanjani wants his job.** In one cable, sources supposedly close to Rafsanjani tell Western diplomats that he is biding his time, as he knows that Khamenei is suffering from “terminal leukemia.” Another cable, citing sources who talked to U.S. Embassy officials in Baku, Azerbaijan, reports rumors that Khamenei suffers from serious bouts of depression and is “unable to function half the time.” (Neither of these stories is exactly a surprise—both have been whispered about in Iran and the diaspora.) Only after Khamenei’s death, according to Rafsanjani’s allies, will he make an open bid to be named leader; and only then will he remove Ahmadinejad and implement his own reforms.

**Rafsanjani wanted the West to speak out about the election.** In a December 9, 2009 meeting, Rafsanjani—who, it bears mentioning, was hardly the most liberal member of the reform movement—told the Austrian ambassador that “it will be helpful if the West spoke out against the election fraud and human rights violation that followed.”

**Ahmadinejad is more reasonable—but also less powerful—in private.** In one document, the blustery Iranian leader is, incredibly, shown to favor normalized relations with the United States. Another cable claims that he was slapped in the face by the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps when he dared suggest that people were discontent and that channels for articulating their complaints must be allowed to exist. This suggests that Ahmadinejad may be more reasonable behind closed doors. Which would be good news—until you consider that, if the president of a country can be slapped in the face by a military commander, it says something about who is really in charge.

**Iran’s attempts to meddle in Iraq have been extensive—and creative.** Several documents show the extent of the Iranian regime’s efforts to influence Iraqi politics. These efforts have apparently spanned the range from bribes, to offering “state sanctioned prostitutes” for Iraqi tribal leaders who are flown to Iran, to arming insurgents of every ideological hue, to creating hundreds of front companies in every economic domain. There are also fascinating reports about Iran trying to send its students to Najaf seminaries and thus undercut the influence of Ayatollah Sistani and his brand of Shiism—which is opposed to the Khomeini-Khamenei iteration—and of Sistani allies trying to block these students from receiving visas to visit Iraq.

**Turkey seems determined to benefit from Iran’s conflict with the West.** Ankara, in the words of the Turkish foreign minister, is trying to emerge as a “third option” in the region, between the staunchly anti-American Iran and the staunchly pro-American Saudi Arabia. Setting itself up as a go-between, Turkey has tried to reassure U.S. diplomats that Iranian officials “have more trust in the U.S.” than in Russia, and would actually prefer to get medical-reactor fuel from America.

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