

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By M. Patel

Najmeh Bozorgmehr is an experienced Iranian journalist, a correspondent for the London-based *Financial Times* in Tehran and a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Ms. Bozorgmehr provides a candid perspective on Iran in her IA Forum interview. She covers a comprehensive range of issues from U.S.-Iran relations to Iran's nuclear program and internal reform in the country. On U.S.- Iran relations:



U.S.-Iran Relations:

International Affairs Forum: The U.S. media gives a lot of attention to Iran and seems quite critical of the Iranian government. From your experience as a journalist, how is the U.S. – the government and the country in general – perceived in Iran?

Najmeh Bozorgmehr: Iranian people consider the U.S. as a country where there is utmost welfare and freedom. It is a land of opportunities and dreams for many young people. Average Iranians would not imagine any poverty and discrimination in the U.S. However, Iranians are also very conscious of history. They do blame the U.S. for engineering the 1953 coup along with Britain against the nationalist government of Dr. Mohammad Mosadegh. Iranians cannot forget the U.S.'s support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the U.S.'s refusal to punish Iraq's use of chemical weapons. That's why the U.S.'s intentions toward Iran are received with great suspicion. The best current example is how Iranians are suspicious of the way in which the U.S. is trying to deal with their nuclear program.

IA-Forum: Was there a change in perception about the U.S. in Iran following September 11? Following the Iraq war? Following the election of President Ahmedinejad? Which of these events is the most defining one?

Ms. Bozorgmehr: Iran was the only country in the Middle East where candles were lit by people in a spontaneous move for the victims of the September 11. Iran, for understandable reasons, did not mourn when the regime of Saddam Hussein fell. Rather, Iran celebrated quietly. But this did not mean that Iranians wish the same fate upon their government. Their suspicion of the U.S.'s intentions in the region – i.e. overt strategy to secure oil – has been increasing. Iranians are also wary about security. Iraq has been a warning to people in the region that the US presence equals insecurity. For this reason, the US presence in neighboring Iraq has changed Iranian perceptions of the US more than September 11. The election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was more of a domestic issue for most people who voted for him and was not linked to international issues such as

Iran-US relations. He did not use the issue – of US-Iran relations – in his election campaign, unlike his main rival, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who indicated resumption of ties as a possibility, should people elect him.

IA-Forum: Does a majority of Iranians seriously believe that the U.S. will attack their country? What can the U.S. do to better its Iran policy in the current context? And what steps can Iran take to improve its relations with the U.S.?

Ms. Bozorgmehr: There is not yet much of a sense of crisis about the possibility of an U.S. attack yet. And there is no solution in the current context but for the U.S. administration and the Iranian regime to enter into talks and put all issues of mutual concern on the table.

IA-Forum: Ethnic and interest groups in the diaspora often influence the politics of relations between the country of residence and the country of origin. What has been the role of the sizable group of Iranian U.S. citizens in terms of their influence in politics at home and their efforts to influence U.S.-Iran relations? How is their role viewed in Iran?

Ms. Bozorgmehr: The Iranian diaspora is generally opposed to the regime in Tehran. But only a small group of them are active in giving information to the US administration. These political activists, most of whom have not gone back to Iran since the 1979 revolution, have been taking advantage of the absence of US diplomats in Tehran by providing selective information that suits their political agenda: bring regime change in Iran. The agenda pursued by Iranian expatriates is not necessarily welcomed by Iranians in Iran. That is one of the reasons that people in Iran do not follow political discussions broadcast from Los Angeles in Farsi.

On the Nuclear Program:

IA-Forum: Why does Iran need a nuclear program?

Ms. Bozorgmehr: Iran says it needs nuclear power plants to reduce its dependence on oil which is not a permanent supply of energy. For this purpose, it says it needs to have a nuclear fuel cycle because the West has not proved reliable in its promises for providing that fuel.

IA-Forum: Is the nuclear program the pursuit of the Ahmedinejad government or is it supported by the Iranian people? Does international pressure on Iran help consolidate Mr. Ahmedinejad consolidate his power by appealing to the nationalist sentiment at home?

Ms. Bozorgmehr: The nuclear program was pursued by three governments before President Ahmadinejad, who has had no special role in setting it up. However, as the president and with his skillful populist language, he has successfully used it to mobilize people and increase his popularity.

IA-Forum: What should the international community do to get Iran to accept the provisions of the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)? The Iranian government seems to

have rebuffed the UN Security Council in its efforts to get Iran to halt its nuclear program, so is there anyway of resolving the matter without sanctions?

Ms. Bozorgmehr: Iran has not yet violated the NPT, rather the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has found that Iran is in “non-compliance.” While the UN watchdog has announced that, it is not yet at a stage where it is ready to say whether Iran’s nuclear program has been diverted to a weapons program (from civilian use) or not. Iran is under pressure to allow more inspections beyond its NPT obligations for confidence-building. Iran does not seem to want to halt its program under any conditions, but has hinted it is ready to make some compromises to address international concerns and to avoid sanctions.

On Lebanon/Hamas, Middle East and role of Iran:

IA-Forum: Hezbollah and Hamas are viewed as terrorist organizations in many countries, yet they are also legitimate political parties in Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority respectively. What is the view in Iran about the perceived role of its support to Hezbollah? How does Iran view Hamas?

Ms. Bozorgmehr: Iranian people, like most Middle Easterners, have great sympathy for Palestinians and do not consider Israel a legitimate regime. And like in other Islamic countries, Hamas and Hizbullah are considered legitimate resistance groups in Iran.

However, there is one difference and that is that Iranians do not like their government to have any sort of extensive involvement in the region, because they believe there are enough problems at home which need to be addressed, leaving not much space and money to be spent outside the borders.

IA-Forum: Mr. Ahmedinejad has used a very harsh rhetoric against Israel. This troubles many in the West. What motivates Mr. Ahmedinejad’s rhetoric?

Ms. Bozorgmehr: President Ahmadinejad has some ideological supporters who supported him in the election and expected him to have a tougher foreign policy, unlike his predecessor Mohammad Khatami who adopted détente policy. But his anti-Israel rhetoric is not for average Iranians. It seems the masses in the greater region care more about that kind of rhetoric.

IA-Forum: Does Iran have regional ambitions? Is the rhetoric about the Shia crescent justified?

Ms. Bozorgmehr: Iran has always had ‘regional ambitions’, before and after the 1979 revolution and in reformist and conservative governments. Iran wants to play a significant regional role, especially in the Persian Gulf, and naturally wants to chip away at the dominant U.S. presence. The issue of “Shia crescent” is the fear of Sunni dynasties and governments which lack popular support and who have a history of suppressing their Shia populations. Their concern is that their Shia populations might call for their rights to be addressed and demand a share in exercising political power.

On Internal reform:

IA-Forum: Are 'moderate political parties' out of the foray in Iranian politics? Can the reform movement be revitalized?

Najmeh: Moderate or reformist political parties are out of the official political power structure, but are still active on the political scene criticizing the government and trying to put their messages across to people. However, they are still in the process of recovering from their heavy defeat in the last presidential elections in June of 2005. To revitalize the reform movement, reformists need to go through their mistakes and find solutions that are acceptable to the Iranian people. Repeating the same slogans of the past like democracy, civil society and rule of law might not be accepted by the people, who consider that reformists are unable to implement those slogans.

In the meantime, they cannot steal President Ahmadinejad's populist agenda. First and foremost, they need to get united and work out their reformist agenda so that it is attractive to the Iranian electorate.

IA-Forum: Thank you very much.

Comments? Please send them to editor@ia-forum.org