

Non-violent Resistance: The Case of Iran (2009-2011)

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INTRODUCTION

The popular protests in Iran, during the period 2009-2011, confirm existing literature that non-violence is transcendental and is articulated in specific contexts in a particular way. Following the elections and faced with a repressive state apparatus, a strategy of non-violence was championed by the opposition as the most powerful means to challenge the results as well as to seek a transformation of the entire political system.

Despite having the same ideological inclinations, motives and beliefs, protests in Northern Africa overcame severe state-sponsored coercion and appeared to have fulfilled their political mission that was espoused from the very outset by strictly adhering to non-violence; the resistance movement in Iran had hardly succeeded. Suggestive of the importance of socio-political processes, the significance of information and social networks in shaping the nature and also the outcome of the non-violent efforts, data from Iran confirms the argument that for non-violence to succeed, it needs a conducive socio-political environment that gradually evolves partly because of human endeavors and partly because of the cultural values, rooted in specific kinds of social churnings. It is also argued in this chapter, that the international context - how Iran is perceived by outside powers and how Iran defines its own role in the region - also constitutes a significant variable for revolutions based on the principle of civil disobedience.

As millions of Iranians poured into the streets and the leaders of the opposition, all of which were former standard bearers of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, publicly challenged the legitimacy of the government, historians and political scientist alike anticipated swift regime change, brought about by popular protests, not seen since the last days of the Shah. After all, it only took six months to bring an end to 2,5 centuries of monarchy, so thirty years of Islamic Republic, it was widely believed, would not be able to survive protests

of such scale. By early 2010, the regime largely succeeded in subduing popular protests and dissent amongst the elite. Notwithstanding, increased international concern and concerted diplomatic initiatives, most notably targeted sanctions against human rights violators by the U.S. and EU, and the regional fallout of the “Arab Spring” in Libya, Syria and Bahrain, the nomenclature of the Islamic Republic remains in power. What accounts for this outcome? Why did the Gandhian notion of rendering state power ineffective through a popular strategy of civil disobedience not bring an end to the tyranny of the Islamic Republic? ¹ Unlike the Revolution of 1979, which was more informed by Iran’s history of political demonstrations, strikes and *Shi’a* notions of resisting tyranny rather than an articulated theory of civil disobedience, ² the protests in 2009 waged a concerted campaign based on strategies of non-violent resistance. From the very beginning the leaders of what would then morph into the Green Movement (*Jonbesh-e Sabz*), articulated their protests within the context of constitutional safeguards of freedom of speech and assembly. As a theologian and member of the Green Movement, Mosen Kadivar put it in July 2009:

In the long term, a regime can hardly oppose millions of peaceful protesters - unless it opts for a massacre and, in doing so, completely loses its legitimacy. We should again and again point to the rights granted by the Iranian constitution. In Article 27, it is clearly pointed out that every citizen has the right to protest. Our protest is non-violent, legal and “green” - thoroughly Islamic.³

As previous standard-bearers of the 1979 Revolution neither Mousavi nor Karroubi were calling for immediate regime change or revolution. Rather both opted for a carefully calibrated campaign of protest, aiming to lead the masses as well as winning over conservative stakeholders (supporters of the *velayat-e faqih* and other members of the political and clerical establishment) who objected to what they perceived blatant election fraud and excessive state-sponsored violence.

¹ Mahatma Gandhi noted “If man will only realize that it is unmanly to obey laws that are unjust, no man’s tyranny will enslave him.” quoted in Per Hergren, *Path of Resistance – The Practice of Civil Disobedience*, (Philadelphia, New Society Publishers, 1993), p.6

² Ervand Abrahamian, “Mass Protests in the Iranian Revolution, 1977-1979”, in Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash, *Civil Resistance and Power Politics – The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 176

³ Mosen Kadivar interviewed in *Der Spiegel* (1 July 2009)
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,633517,00.html> (website accessed 12 October 2011)

The 2009 presidential Elections and Protests

Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979 reached a crucial turning point following the June 2009 presidential elections. The events, which unfolded after the disputed elections and policies and strategies, employed by the Iranian government to silence widespread protest have not only completely eroded the legitimacy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government, but stripped any republican elements of Iran's political system. Since the elections, the country finds itself ruled by an elite, comprised of clerical hardliners and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The vision of this loosely affiliated clerical-military alliance of a "new Iran" had already manifested itself during the first term of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in both politics and state-society relations. Thus, what Iran has been witnessing since 2009 is not so much a violent culmination of the long ongoing factional struggle between Iran's political partisan groups but rather the usurpation of power by a hardliner elite, which is forcibly implementing its own vision of governance in Iran rooted in the securitization of society and militarization of politics. The 2009 election and the subsequent crackdown largely aimed to provide legitimacy to the principalist movement and replace the reformist discourse and Khatami out of the public consciousness by orchestrating a landslide victory at the ballot box.⁴ By 2011, the opposition had largely been purged and the principalist's hegemony established. But Ahmadinejad's subsequent ascendancy had, in itself, started to challenge the status quo and has increasingly become a liability in its own right.⁵

Following the reformist project of Mohammad Khatami from 1997 until 2005, which aimed to promote democratization, the rule of law and human rights in the Islamic Republic, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 marked a resurgence of political and religious authoritarianism in Iranian politics. Populist rhetoric catering to conservative constituents was accompanied by a dramatic deterioration of human rights and what could best be described as the 2nd Cultural Revolution since the Islamic

⁴ Ali Ansari, "Last year's Iranian Presidential Election: Urban Myths Revisited" *The World Today* Vol. 66, No.7 (June 2010)

⁵ Bernd Kaussler, "Iran's Leadership Falls Out With Itself" *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst* (1 July 2011)

Revolution. Iran's first non-cleric president advanced hardliner positions both in domestic and foreign policy, and largely created new fault-lines in Iranian politics. Whilst the economic expansion of the IRGC has always been a fundamental element of Iranian crony capitalism, it was not until former *Basij* and Corps member Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took power in 2005 that the Guards' clout in politics and the economy intensified. By 2006, it had become evident to most Iranians that Ahmadinejad's populist election promises of "redistributing wealth" would not translate into government policy. Far from tackling the country's nepotistic political economy, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad soon moved on to reward his own cronies in the Revolutionary Guards by positioning them in high-level government positions and granting them lucrative oil and gas deals from the onset of his term.⁶ For the budget year of 2005-2006, the new president doubled the spending on the Coordination Council for the Propagation of Islam, increased that of the Revolutionary Guards by 142 percent and raised funding for the Ministry of Welfare by a mere 3.8 per cent.⁷ By the end of 2006, Ahmadinejad's policies, largely the product of the ideology and counsel of his hardliner backers and clerics, created an unpredictable domestic climate, causing foreign investors to stay out and even some Iranian business to leave the country.⁸ The government's implementation of so-called "social justice projects" which officially aimed to redistribute of financial resources, but effectively almost exclusively catered to the military and paramilitary groups. Likewise, privatization efforts continued to be jeopardized by lack of commitment and an unpredictable political climate. Attempts to restructure the budgeting system effectively took away decision-making processes from independent bodies such as the Management and Planning Organization

⁶ For accusations of corruption in 2006 and a statement on the Revolutionary Guard's stake in the economy by its exiled founder and former adviser to Khomeini, Mohsen Sasgar, see Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *Iran-Report* Nr. 12-2006, pp. 8 and 10; In 2004, in a move, which not only openly defied the authority of the Khatami government but was a clear demonstration of the IRGC's increasing economic clout, the Guards' closed the newly opened international "Imam Khomeini Airport" in May 2004. Having lost the contract of running the airport to a Turkish contractor, the IRGC air force simply shut down the entire airport on its first day of operations. see Frederic Whrey, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk, Alireza Nader, Lydia Hansell, Rasool Nafisi, S.R. Bohandy, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps*, RAND 2009, p. 74

⁷ Bernd Kaussler "Bread not the Bomb" in *The World Today*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (March 2007), p. 7

⁸ Towards the end of 2006, Japan and Germany significantly reduced investments, joint-ventures and exports to Iran. see Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *Iran Report*, Nr.11-2006, p.9 and 10; For initial Iranian counter-efforts to attract investments and a statement by Deputy-Finance Minister Mohammad Khaza'i, the head of the Iran Investment and Economic and Technical Assistance Organization see *Aftab-e Yazd website*, (15 Jul 2006) BBC Monitoring

(MPO), the Money and Credit Council (MCC), and the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) and brought them under presidential administration. This move essentially left the government in full control over budgetary affairs whilst reducing supervisory control over the proper allocation of financial resources. The president's war on the "economic mafia", or "powerful owners of capital" who were accused of exploiting their position in the political establishment to further their own ends was effectively a means to tie Revolutionary Guards closer into governance as well as economic activity.⁹ In an interview given to a reformist newspaper in 2006, Brig. Gen. Abdol-Reza Abed, IRGC Commander and head of *Khtam-ol Anbia*, the IRGC's energy subsidiary, stated that business made up approximately 30 per cent of the Guards' operations. By 2009, the IRGC subsidiaries were awarded a total of over \$ 14 billion in government contracts, ranging from hydrocarbon ventures to telecommunication.¹⁰

Notwithstanding his own inherent cronyism, Ahmadinejad's government continued with smear campaigns against members of the opposition. At the societal level, vigilante groups and stepped up surveillance and intimidation efforts on the part of domestic intelligence and security services worked efficiently towards the securitization of society.¹¹ *Basij* and *Hezbollah* continued to arbitrarily detain, intimidate and even murder journalists, intellectuals, students and political and human rights activist with impunity. Notwithstanding the depth of societal discontent vis-à-vis mounting authoritarianism and economic mismanagement, Ahmadinejad carried on with vigorously authoritarian and nationalistic (to the point of chauvinistic) policies.¹² Seemingly obsessed with *Shi'a* eschatology, Zionism and the Holocaust, many Iranians felt that most of the president's attention was dedicated to unnecessarily provoke Western powers rather than engage in any meaningful domestic or foreign policies. What emerged out of these state-sponsored

⁹ Saeed Barzin, *Iran's Economic Policy and its Critics*, of BBC Monitoring, (13 October 2008); MENAS, *Iran Strategic Focus*, (August, 2007), Vol.3, No.8, pp.5-6; MENAS, *Iran Strategic Focus*, (July, 2007) Vol.3, No.7, pp. 1-2; MENAS, *Iran Strategic Focus*, (January, 2008), Vol.4, No.1. pp. 5-7

¹⁰ 16 March, 2007, *Financial Times*; 18 May 2009, *US Fed News*; 19 August, 2009, *EIU News Wire*; 21 July 2006, *Middle East Economic Digest*

¹¹ for a statement on the role of the *Basij* by Ayatollah Mesbha Yazdi see *Iran*, (30 June 2008) BBC Monitoring

¹² see Ali Ansari, "Iran under Ahmadinejad: populism and its malcontents" in *International Affairs*, Vol.84 No.4 (July, 2008), pp.683-700

confrontations and defamations were new fault lines in Iranian politics: a loosely affiliated alliance of Revolutionary Guards, Basij and hardliners on one side and an increasingly irate cross-partisan clergy and moderate and reformist politicians on the other.

Effectively admitting the pending election fraud, in June 2009, IRGC's political chief, Yadollah Javani, warned Mir-Hossein Mousavi's backers that the Guards would not tolerate the formation of a post-election political force under the banner of Mousavi's "Green Movement" - the color of his campaign.¹³ The post-election crackdown of members of the opposition as well as thousands of protesters then marked a carefully planned and executed valve aimed at ridding the country of the reformist enterprise as well as political pluralism. State sponsored violence in the streets, widespread torture and killings during arbitrary detention as well as the infamous televised show trials of high profile members of the opposition created a volatile deadlock in Iran. Faced with the popular demands to renegotiate power structures, the government responded with a large-scale crackdown, which in the words of IRGC Commander, was the "IRGC's duty to confront the regime's soft threats, including cultural, economic, political and social ones." In September, Jafari also acknowledged that prior to the elections the Guards were closely watching activities by reformists, particularly former president Khatami, and were forced to intervene in the elections in order to thwart their alleged undermining efforts. With the disclosure and parliamentary probes into prisoner abuse it also became evident that the IRGC had access to detainees and also interrogated them. Even though Kahrizak, an IRGC-led detention centre, was closed by Khomeini's decree citing poor conditions, the Supreme Leader's representative at the IRGC Ali Saidi defended the Guards' parallel

¹³ "Iran's reformists warned against revolt" *Associated Press*, 11 June 2009; Far more indicative of what would essentially manifest itself as the post-election hardliner onslaught against political opponents when a parliamentary probe into corruption detailed nepotism and corruption throughout the country's government and clerical circles. Abbas Palizdar, the chairperson of the parliamentary committee and a loyalist of Ahmadinejad, accused more than forty senior clerics and high-level politicians of corruption and executive crimes. As a close ally to Ahmadinejad who had threatened to , the "whistle-blower" seemed to have been backed by the government, in particular because most of the accused were potential rivals from the conservative camp in the 2009 elections. see *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* website, 30 June 2008 (BBC Monitoring); *Siyasat-e Ruz*, 18 June 2008 (BBC Monitoring) ; *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 1 July 2008 (BBC Monitoring); for the IRGC's cyber warfare capabilities see Fars News 29 June 2009, (BBC Monitoring)

domestic intelligence activities in July as fundamental for national security.¹⁴ IRGC officials constituted half of Ahmadinejad's new cabinet in 2009, posting them in the strategic ministries of the interior, culture and Islamic guidance, defense and oil.¹⁵

As securitisation of citizens has largely been carried out through the expansion of the intelligence and security agencies, the regime's onslaught against the elite has been carried out by means of intimidation and arrests as well as through concerted smear campaigns, defaming Rafsanjani, Khatami and Moussavi as colluding with Western governments in a "soft war" against the Islamic Republic. On 27 December 2009, *Basij* and plain-clothes units interrupted a speech given by Mohammad Khatami in a religious centre near the former house of Ayatollah Khomeini in Jamaran and reportedly fired on crowds in the streets, allegedly killing as many as eight demonstrators in Tehran and Tabriz, including Moussavi's nephew. Following the Ashura Riots, Prosecutor-General Gholmhosseyn Mohseni-Ezhei stated during a Majlis session in December that he intends to prosecute Mehdi Karroubi, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Faezeh Hashemi (daughter of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani). Rafsanjani was marginalized and de facto stripped of his religious titles.¹⁶ Karroubi himself was subject to an assassination attempt on 8 January. Eventually following the protests in February 2011, all leaders were put under house arrest and held incommunicado, effectively causing the Green Movement to stall.

The Role of the Military and Security Forces

The IRGC, the *Basij* militia, law enforcement and intelligence agencies and the judiciary largely carried out the crackdown against protesters and members of the opposition. Both the EU and the U.S. government sanctioned numerous police unit commanders, prison guards, prosecutors, judges and other officials for alleged torture, murder and other grave

¹⁴ Bernd Kaussler, "Internal Bleeding: Domestic Resistance to Iran's Regime" *Jane's Intelligence Review*, (January 2010) <http://jir.janes.com/public/jir/index.shtml>

¹⁵ Gareth Smyth, "Ahmadinejad's New Cabinet: More conservative than ever" <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/0831/p06s07-wome.html>

¹⁶ for attacks against Rafsanjani see *Fars News Agency* (30 December 2009) *IRNA* (16 December 2009), Mehr News Agency (16 December 2009), *ILNA* (16 December 2009) An official of the state *IRNA* news agency called on staff to use the title "Hojjat ol-Eslam" rather than "Ayatollah" for Rafsanjani. *Fararu*, (16 December 2009) BBC Monitoring

human rights violations since the 2009 elections.¹⁷ The crackdown could not have succeeded without the strategic use of numerous government agencies and armed forces. Prior to the June 2009 election, the IRGC made several structural changes in its command and control, integrating the *Basij*, as well as redirecting considerable attention to asymmetrical warfare and increased deterrence posture vis-à-vis Israel and the U.S. as well as internal security. The latter redirection of resources was made clear on numerous occasions and was largely informed by fears over an impending soft-revolution, not unlike those in Eastern Europe in 1989 as well as Ukraine in 2004-2005. In a speech in August 2009, the IRGC's then new commander, Jafari stated: "The was a perception that confronting hard threats was the top priority, but after careful study, we came to the conclusion that it was the IRGC's duty to confront the regime's soft threats, including cultural, economic, political and social ones."¹⁸ Underwritten by a sophisticated intelligence and security assets, IRGC has largely risen to one of the most powerful political brokers in the Islamic Republic, bringing the country closer towards a praetorian state. In this light, the alleged election engineering and subsequent crackdown should not be seen as a " [...] struggle for power between reformist and hard-liner camps, but rather as an assertion of influence and a de facto coup by the emerging militant class and its preferred candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, against the clerical oligarchy that came to power through the 1978—79 Iranian Revolution."¹⁹ Thus, one key variable why the regime has so far not collapsed was the role of the IRGC as well as regular armed forces. Even though there have been several defections by ambassadors in the Foreign Ministry, the regular armed forces never defected, thus allowing the IRGC and *Basij* to defend their economic and political stake in the country. IRGC units, police forces and militias, but not members of the regular armed forces largely underwrote crackdowns of protests. The

¹⁷ Laura Rozen, "European list IDs 80+ Iran militia, police for possible EU human rights sanctions", http://www.politico.com/blogs/laurarozen/0211/EU_list_identifies_Iran_militia_police_to_be_targeted_for_sanctions_on_human_rights_grounds.html 26 February 2011 (website accessed 1 December 2011), for the EU Council decisions see Council Decision 2011/235/CFSP (OJ L 100, 14.4.2011, p. 51); Council Regulation (EU) No 359/2011 (OJ L 100, 14.4.2011, p. 1); U.S. Departments of the Treasury and State Announce Designations for Human Rights Abuses in Iran Media Note Office of the Spokesman, (Washington, DC February 23, 2011)

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/02/156980.htm>

¹⁸ Bernd Kaussler, "Internal Bleeding: Domestic Resistance to Iran's Regime" *Jane's Intelligence Review*;

¹⁹ Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0 *The Washington Quarterly*, (Winter 2011) 34:1, p. 45

Supreme Leader never called on to mobilize the army from their barracks outside the urban areas, but rather relied on militias. Conscious of a more benign attitude towards the Green Movement within the ranks of the regular armed forces, the Revolutionary Guards, have advanced to the country's most powerful internal security force and were, thus able to keep the regular armed forces in check.²⁰

	Total Strength	Army	Air Force	Navy	IRGC	<i>Ansar-e Hezbollah</i> (Followers of the Party of God)	<i>Basij</i> Militia	Customs	MOIS	IRGC Intelligence	Law Enforcement Forces
Active Personnel	523,000	350,000	30,000	18,000 ²¹	125,000	5,000	90,000 ²²	25,000	15,000	2,000	40,000
Reserves	350,000	350,000	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1.5 million	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Table 1: Internal Security Balance (Source: *Jane's* 2011)

Even though Iran's internal security balance indicates that the regular military possesses considerable military hardware assets and manpower, they are largely comprised of poorly trained conscripts, are based in garrisons outside cities, largely isolated from the political arena and are subject to tight civilian control.²³ So, while the regular forces' capabilities have not been tested yet in an internal conflict (similar to Tunisia, Egypt or Libya), in tactical and political terms, the IRGC constitutes a formidable force to reckon with. As Iranian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegelo put it:

The power of the IRGC means that the civic movement in Iran has a much harder struggle ahead of it than those in Tunisia and Egypt. The Iranian regime is more ruthless and systematic in repressing its opponents than either Ben Ali or Mubarak were. It also has a stronger ideological base than the Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf region. Iranian leaders believe they legitimately represent their country, granting them the right to govern according to their religious beliefs. In most of President Ahmadinejad's speeches, for example, there are references to the twelfth *Shia* imam, who long ago went into hiding and will one day return to rule the world. Ahmadinejad has also announced his

²⁰ for statements on the Green Movement by the Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Army see Fatemah Aman, "Living with the Artesh's Green Sympathies" in *Middle East Institute Viewpoints, The Artesh – Iran's Marginalized Regular Army* (November 2011), p. 16

²¹ The IRGC has some 20,000 personnel in its naval branch, trained in asymmetric warfare

²² It is estimated that the *Basij* can mobilize up to 1.5 million militias

²³ Ken Katzman, "The Politics of Iran's Regular Military" in *Middle East Institute Viewpoints, The Artesh – Iran's Marginalized Regular Army* (November 2011), p. 10; Ali Alfoneh, "Eternal Rivals? The Artesh and IRGC in *Middle East Institute Viewpoints, The Artesh – Iran's Marginalized Regular Army* (November 2011), p. 32

intention to return to the atmosphere of the first decade of the Revolution in order to revive revolutionary values.²⁴

Non-Violent Tactics Used by Protesters and the Opposition

Despite a declared ban of protests on state TV and the Supreme Leader's unequivocal warning about holding demonstrations, members of the opposition immediately publicly questioned the legitimacy of the election outcome and from the onset called for non-violent protest. Carefully maneuvering within the legal and political environment of the Islamic Republic, both Mousavi and Karroubi knew how to effectively harness the popular momentum by stressing the civil and legitimate nature of protests and condemning the atrocities committed by authorities. Following the resignation of all his public offices, Mehdi Karroubi moved to write a series of open letters to the authorities, highlighting human rights violations and the right to peaceful protest, granted under the Iranian Constitution. His open letter to the Head of the Intelligence Ministry read in part:

The situation is so bad that right now those held in Evin prison consider it God's blessing to be at Evin instead of being held in illegal prisons. Dear Mr Mohseni-Ezhe'i, is this the security mission that you intended to carry out under the name of security i.e. beat up innocent young Iranians in the streets, transport them to prisons in pools of blood, and force them to undergo months of waiting, which make their families worry - all for the crime of protesting against the result of the election, which they believe was not legal and legitimate? Is this Islamic kindness when our sons and daughters are murdered in prisons and those behind these murders refuse to take responsibility, and in this way defend the self-proclaimed and irresponsible forces who are working with them? Have you ever gone behind the doors of the Evin prison and the Islamic courts to witness the full-of-tears eyes of mothers, fathers, partners or children, who are trying to know whether their loved ones are alive or not? Put yourself in the place of those anxious fathers and mothers for a second who have not heard from their children or partners for a month. Evin prison and revolution's courts officials instead of defusing the anxiety of these people treat them with disrespect and ask them to disperse. This is what is happening behind Evin prison's doors.²⁵

For the regime to had raised the stakes in such violent fashion and for the opposition to continuously publicly name and shame the government for its committed atrocities, taboos were been broken on both sides. In political terms, calling for protests by members of the elite and, likewise, for members of the government to call for the execution of the opposition, marked a major turning point for the Islamic Republic. Spontaneous protests,

²⁴Ramin Jahanbegloo –“The Green Movement and the Dignity of Nonviolence in Iran” Dissent Magazine (28 February, 2011) <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=454> (website accessed 19 September 2011)

²⁵ *E'temad-e Melli*, (25 July 2009) BBC Monitoring

demonstrations organized in online social networking sites and those called by leaders of the opposition were largely informed by a commitment to non-violence. Footage and eyewitness accounts suggest that on numerous occasions during the summer months of 2009, non-violent resistance undermined actions of security forces. One of the most powerful images of the early protests depicts *militias* riding with motorcycles into a large crowd and beating protesters. When one of the *Basij* was captured and his motorcycle set ablaze, several protesters rescued him from the crowd and tended to his injuries.²⁶ Students, recent graduates and human rights activists largely organized protests in a grassroots fashion. It was not until August 2009 that Moussavi created the “Green Path of Hope” and implicitly called for the continuation of concerted non-violent campaigns.²⁷ Informed by Iran’s history of non-violent resistance as well as guided by proven practices of staging non-violent uprisings²⁸, protesters and members of the opposition used a variety of techniques:

From the onset of protests, Iranians used the same technique successfully employed during the 1979 Revolution and chanted “*Allah-o-Akbar*” (God is Great) from the rooftops at nighttime. The concerted use of this non-violent tactic, advocated by Khomeini during the Islamic Revolution, posed a serious threat to the ideological underpinnings of the Islamic Republic.²⁹

Like in 1979, the symbolic nature of funerals, mourning marches commemorating *Shi’a* martyrs as well as other holidays were effectively used to stage protests. The mourning of dissidents and killed protesters during important holidays, such as *Ashura*, as well as on

²⁶ see footage purportedly taken on 15 June 2009 in Tehran <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSECAvBTanQ> (website accessed 29 December 2011); For reports of uniformed security personnel disobeying orders and donning the color green see “Ashura 2009” *Foreign Reports Bulletin* (28 December 2009)

²⁷ Mousavi called for a continuation of nightly rooftop chants and demonstrations against the government stating that “There is no way but praying to God and calls of [Allahu akbar, "God is great"] in small and big gatherings.” Borzou Daragah, “Iran’s Mousavi Urges Continued Civil Disobedience” *Los Angeles Times* (6 September 2009) <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/sep/06/world/fg-iran-mousavi6> (website accessed 28 December 2011)

²⁸ see the work on civil disobedience in Iran by former IRGC officer and dissident, Mohsen Sazegara. Farnaz Fassihi, “Fighting A Regime he Helped Create” *The Wall Street Journal* (3 December 2009) <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125980542530173987.html> (website accessed 29 December 2011)

²⁹ For a video compilation of rooftop chants from June until December 2009 see *Iran: The Rooftop Project* <http://www.mightierthan.com/2009/07/rooftop/> (website accessed 30 December 2011)

the third, seventh and 40th days after one's death turned into mass gatherings. Even though security forces continued to violently crack down and arrest participants, civil resistance, cloaked in such powerful religious symbolism, contributed to a change of the political narrative in the Islamic Republic. The brutal response to dissent and protest essentially stripped the regime of religious and revolutionary legitimacy.³⁰

As security forces changed tactics, so did protesters start to adapt and change techniques. Protesters posed as "human shields" (often women) to protect fellow fallen demonstrators.³¹ By July 2009, one commentator described the protests as having entered a "Phase II", including the boycott of goods advertised on state-controlled television; attempting to deny power to state-run TV evening news broadcasts by turning on all electric appliances just before the news. Ad-hoc street demonstrations were aimed to be long enough to chant anti-regime slogans but then dissolved quickly as to deny law enforcement forces making arrests. Another purported tactic was to identify militias and other vigilantes by marking the color green or place photo of protest victims in front of their homes.³²

Friday Prayers, whose sermons have always delivered by the highest ranked clerics and whose content indicate and often dictate substance and direction of Iran's domestic and foreign policy, were also subject to sabotage attempts by protesters, which used broadcasted prayer gatherings to chant anti-regime slogans.³³

In 2011, environmental protests in the Azerbaijan provinces, blamed the local and central governments for the degradation and substantial shrinking of Lake Orumieh, one of the

³⁰ for the mourning of Neda Agha Soltan see Robin Wright "In Iran One Woman's Death May Have Many Consequences" *Time* (21 June 2009) <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1906049,00.html> (website accessed 29 December 2011), for the protest staged by the group "Mourning Mothers" see <http://www.madraneparklale.org/> (website accessed 29 December 2011)

³¹ Can Non Violence Work in Iran? Interview with Ramin Jahanbegloo and Roberto Tuscano (18 April 2011) http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/18/can_nonviolence_work_in_iran?page=full

³² Robin Wright, "Iran's Protesters: Phase 2 of Their Feisty Campaign" (27 July 2009) *Time Magazine* <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1913765,00.html> (30 December 2011)

³³ for the speech given by Rafsanjani at the Friday Prayer see "Iran crisis: Rafsanjani attacks regime", *The Guardian* (17 July 2009) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/17/iran-crisis-friday-prayers>

world's largest saltwater lakes. Local protests by environmental activists have been met with brutal force and authorities arrested numerous activists.³⁴

Even though mass protests and the brutal response ushered a crisis of legitimacy for the regime, concerted efforts of civil disobedience never gained enough national momentum to seriously challenge or weaken the government. Whilst the Green Movement did attract the support of several key labor unions, the socio-economic environment coupled with political repression largely prevented sustained national strikes. As one labor organizer put it in 2010:

There have been major reductions in labor actions in the last five or six years. Most workers can't afford to strike, and temporary contract workers have virtually no rights. Full-time workers can engage in peaceful protests, according to the Iranian constitution, around working conditions or being paid on time. That leaves more than 8 million workers prevented from organizing themselves. Six years ago, under former president Mohammad Khatami, the situation was better. ILO [International Labor Organization] covenants were signed, which provided some freedom to organize, combined with some encouragement by certain government spokespeople.³⁵

In the absence of major support from Iran's mercantile bourgeoisie class, the *bazaar* and given the atomized state of unions in key industries, civil disobedience never translated into a sustained nationwide strike.

Street Violence: Use of Vigilante Groups and Militias

Security and military presence had been significantly increased in Tehran and other big cities prior and during the polls in June 2009. When the Interior Ministry was surrounded after they had allegedly informed Mousavi that he had won the elections, massive concrete barriers had already been deployed and erected. Given the logistics for such security parameters, it seems that this had been planned well in advance. Following a remark by the Supreme Leader about "election security", the Election Headquarter in the Interior Ministry announced at 4.30 pm on election day that political gathering were

³⁴ Golnaz Esfandiari (1 September 2011) "Dying Lake Gives New Life To Iran's Antigovernment Protests" *Radio Free Europe*

³⁵ Bill Balderston, "Interview: In Iran, Labor Activists Face Repression" (19 January 2010) *Labor Notes*, <http://labornotes.org/blogs/2010/01/interview-iran-labor-activists-face-repression> (website accessed 29 December 2011)

banned before the announcement of the final election results.³⁶ Following the announcement of Ahmadinejad's victory, Mousavi's and Karroubi's election campaign headquarters were invaded and several arrested. Large-scale arrests of prominent reformists followed, including former President Mohammad Khatami's brother as well as previous cabinet members, Saeed Hajjarian, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Behzad Nabavi, and Abdolfattah Soltani.

Security agencies moved quickly and shut down numerous reform-orientated websites by overloading servers with millions of fake access requests as well as decreased the bandwidth of Iran's internet service providers drastically, making the exchange of audio and video material harder. The mobile phone network (the majority of Iranians use mobile phones rather than landlines) was also shut down. *Facebook*, and *Twitter*, which soon turned makeshift communication platforms for protesters as well as other websites were shut down. Despite government censorship and filtering, social networking sites and the online video portal *youtube* became important organizational and communication tools, which largely contradicted the government's official narrative.³⁷ Circumventing the media blackout and the authorities' manipulation of news, the opposition became "a ganglion, a tangled bundle of nerve cells where each part of the system is constantly and instantly in touch with all other parts".³⁸ Since the elections, the Iranian government has turned its cyber-security into an effective tool of information control and surveillance. Particularly before anticipated demonstrations, authorities have resorted to causing Internet slowdowns and disconnections, or jamming telephone lines.³⁹

As far as violence on the streets was concerned, *Basij* and *Hezbollah* initially used their usual tactics of driving into crowds with motorbikes armed with chains and batons.

³⁶ *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1*, (12 June 2009), (BBC Monitoring)

³⁷ Borzou Daragahi, "Exiles Keep Iran in Touch" *Los Angeles Times* (10 December 2009) <http://www.latimes.com/news/nation-and-world/la-fg-iran-exiles10-2009dec10,0,2320373,full.story> (website accessed 19 September 2011)

³⁸ Gary Sick, "The Decade's First Revolution?" *The Daily Beast* (2 January 2010) <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/01/02/the-decades-first-revolution.html> (website accessed 18 September 2011)

³⁹ Reportes Without Borders, Internet Enemies – Iran <http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-iran,39777.html> (website accessed 12 Octob 2011)

Following extensive amateur coverage of these incidents in international news outlets, the militia-units as well as plainclothes policemen then changed their tactics and abstained from intervening during demonstrations, but rather followed groups of demonstrators to their neighborhoods. Another tactic was the use of pain-ball guns to mark protest participants and thus be able to identify them later. Apartments were then subsequently raided and residents beaten up for participating.⁴⁰ In addition, numerous Iranian households reported receiving intimidating robocalls from government agencies, warning them that the security services were aware of their alleged activities and that of their children.⁴¹ Some protestors were taken to *Basij* bases and illegal detention centers, such as Lolagar Mosque *Basij* Base and *Basij* Meghdad Base 177, prior to being transferred to police stations or intelligence offices. On 20 June, when, according to Tehran's mayor three million demonstrators protested in the streets, the *Basij* militias killed at least 34 people. Conscious of students' support for the reformist cause, several university dormitories in Tehran were raided by militias a police forces.⁴² Intelligence surveillance of student groups and universities increased and their infiltration by security forces and militias increased significantly after the summer protests. According to the Iranian government's own accounts, at least 48 protestors died on the streets between 2009 and June 2010 as well as four detainees who were murdered under torture at the Kahrizak Detention center. Human rights activists estimate the number of killed protesters much higher but cite the government's intimidation efforts as reasons why not more families have come forward.⁴³ The protests attracted hundreds of thousands of people during 2009, gaining nationwide momentum throughout June and July and attracting considerable crowds after the inauguration of Ahmadinejad in August. Large-scale

⁴⁰ see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TtwxUvbPxU&feature=related>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSj4i6pSgSA&feature=ytn%3Ampnews> ;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9T3IGXDP4VA&eurl=http%3A%2F%2Fenduringamerica%2Ecom%2F2009%2F06%2F15%2Fvideo%2Dthe%2Dprotests%2Din%2Dtehran%2F&feature=player_embedded ;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oU5wpYFCJ9o&eurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Efacebook%2Ecom%2Fprofile%2Ephp%3Fid%3D37105460%26ref%3Dts&feature=player_embedded

⁴¹ Information received from Iranian analyst in Tehran on basis of anonymity, 17 June, 2009

⁴² International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, *Men of Violence – Perpetrators of the Post-Election Crackdown* (June 2010) p.6; see also Scott Peterson, “Eyewitness: Iranian militiamen shot 300 rounds during Monday's protest” *The Christian Science Monitor*, (16 June, 2009)
<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/0616/p06s09-wome.html> (website accessed 29 December 2011)

⁴³ *ibid*

protests were also held on major holidays, *Rooze Jahaniye Qods* “International Jerusalem Day” (18 September), *13th of Aban* (4 November), “Iranian Students Day” (7 December) and the “*Ashura* Festival” in December. After the inauguration and parallel to arresting and intimidating high-profile reformists, tactics used by security forces ranged from walking within the ranks of protesters and brutally beating up people to killing protesters with firearms.⁴⁴ In an effort to more effectively control the anticipated protests and mourning marches in support of deceased dissident cleric Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, authorities declared martial law in his hometown Najafbad in December. In other cities, particular the capital, an overwhelming presence of security forces managed to prevent major demonstrations. The strategic deployment of militias and police along avenues and streets effectively dispersed people and thus prevented groups of protesters to merge into one big crowd. For the regime, whose populist appeal always relied on symbolism, the *Ashura* holiday on 9 December and the 31st anniversary of the Islamic Republic on 12 February 2010 in particular marked two crucial watershed events. The overwhelming presence of security forces coupled with staged pro-government rallies considerably weakened the momentum of the Green Movement, which had been building during the previous eight months. During *Ashura*, Iran’s judiciary put the death toll of protesters at seven but Amnesty International claimed as many as fifteen had been killed including the nephew of Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Police brutality was severe and included the use of firearms and the hurling of rocks by militias of bridges at vehicles below.⁴⁵ Following excessive and the unprecedented brutality by militias and fearing an evident backlash, several IRGC commanders asked for strategic restraint:

Addressing a group of *Basij* in Bushehr on December 22, Khamenei's representative in the IRGC warned against undisciplined violence. "Sometimes you have to approach people with physical action; for others non-physical action is necessary," *Hojatoeslam* Mojtaba Zolnur said after Musavi's motorcade was attacked in Qom on December 20. "If we throw all three heads of the green sedition into prison, nothing will happen at all," Zolnur added, presumably referring to Musavi, Karrubi, and Khatami. "But if we take any physical action against them, it is possible that the flames of these issues will spread."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Iason Athanasiadis, “Iran forces kill 8 on *Shi'ite* Holy Day”, *The Washington Times*, (28 December 2009) <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/dec/28/iran-forces-kill-8-on-shiite-holy-day/?page=all>

⁴⁵ *Mehr News Agency* (29 December 2009) BBC Monitoring; Amnesty International Press Release *Iran: End slide to more bloodshed* (28 December 2009)

⁴⁶ Foreign Reports Bulletin, *Ashura 2009* (December 28, 2009)

In religious-political terms, the killing of protesters during *Ashura* - the commemoration of Husain's martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala, which to *Shi'a* symbolizes the battle between good, and evil – represented a watershed event in the Islamic Republic. The willingness to use widespread violence against crowds stripped of the religious cloak, which was built on fighting against tyranny and standing for the *mostafazin* (the oppressed), and with it any remaining legitimacy. This intransigent mindset and commitment to rely on violence again manifested itself in February 2010 during the 21st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Underwritten by a concerted campaign to expel foreign journalists, censor domestic media outlets and shut down the telecommunication and Internet network, security forces had been stationed at strategic locations across Tehran and were thus able to check the movement of protesters and defy any major assemblies in public squares.⁴⁷ What was considered by outside observers as a tactical victory for the regime rather than end of the Green Movement was interpreted by hardliners as victory of the Islamic Revolution. As one editorial noted: “Once again the great and vigilant Iranian nation with its participation [in those ceremonies] disrupted all the attempts at sedition. It proved that its enemies are incapable of understanding and appreciating it”⁴⁸ Whilst there was considerable showing of pro-regime rallies, it was excessive brutality, arrests and violence against the leaders themselves⁴⁹, which caused the protest movement to stall and lose considerable momentum nationwide. As one demoralized dissident stated:

There were 300 of us, maximum 500. Against 10,000 people. [...] It means they won and we lost. They defeated us. They were able to gather so many people. But this doesn't mean we have been defeated for good. It's a defeat for now. We need time to regroup.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ A statement by the reformist Militant Cleric Society condemned the violence against reformist figures and protesters during the rally held on 11 February. *Parleman News* (BBC Monitoring) 14 February 2010 see statement by Police Chief Esmail Ahmadi Moghaddam warning protesters of “cooperating” with foreign media. *The Green Voice of Freedom* website (BBC Monitoring) 20 February 2010; also see VOA, BBC and DW condemn Iran for blocking broadcasts, *VOA News.Com* (BBC Monitoring) 10 February 2010

⁴⁸ *Jam-e Jam Newspaper* (BBC Monitoring) 14 February 2010

⁴⁹ see Associated Foreign Press reports, “Opposition Leaders Attacked As Iran Marks Revolution Day” *The Daily Star*, (12 February 2010) <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=125940>

⁵⁰ Juan Cole, “How the Iranian Regime Checkmated the Green Dissidents on a Crucial Day” (12 February 2010) <http://www.juancole.com/2010/02/how-iranian-regime-checkmated-green.html> (website accessed 29 December 2011)

Notwithstanding protests throughout 2010 and 2011, the grassroots of the Green Movement never managed to regain its lost momentum. In fact, fearing major bloodshed the leadership called of major protests in June 2010. Yet, the anniversary of the disputed election purportedly still attracted as many as 100,000 protesters.⁵¹ With the onset of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, the Iranian government was quick to manipulate regional pro-democracy movements as manifestation of the Islamic Revolution against pro-American Arab autocracies whilst simultaneously subduing democracy protests at home. In foreign policy terms, the fall of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya as well as the protests and government crackdowns across the Gulf, particularly Bahrain has presented the Iranian government with major geopolitical challenges. As Arab states moved to label the unrests as Iranian-backed *Shi’a* cabal, the leadership in Tehran increased its regional defense posture and exacerbated the Cold War-like security dilemma in the Gulf even further.⁵² As Iran was organizing flotillas and Saudi Arabia dispatching Peninsula Shield forces into Bahrain to prevent the fall of the Sunni regime, the Green Movement attempted to use the popular uprising to their own advantage. When Moussavi and Karroubi called “to honor the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt” on 12 February, more than 350,000 people purportedly poured into the streets, leading to the arrest of both leaders.⁵³ Due to the overwhelming presence of militias and police forces across strategic locations in the major cities, the authorities effectively cracked down before the fallout of the Arab Spring could gain any sustainable traction among Iranian society. One student activist at Amir Kabir University described the violence in Tehran’s streets:

The Special Police Guard that is responsible for most of the crackdown used city buses as shields and to transport some of the detainees. [...] They are also especially hard on students with prior arrest records. I have to watch out now. I have been arrested twice. I can’t go to jail for a third time. You don’t know what happens in detention centers. I was kept in a room that was just larger than a grave. I could not move—I barely moved. And the entire time you hear people screaming and begging for mercy. It is terrifying. I don’t want to go back there again.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Michael Theodoulou, Green protesters sit in defiance, *The National* (12 June 2010) <http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100613/FOREIGN/706129871&SearchID=7339402166281> (website accessed 29 December 2011)

⁵² see Bernd Kaussler, "Gulf of Mistrust: Iran and the Gulf Protests" (Washington, DC: *Foreign Policy In Focus*, April 21, 2011)

⁵³ Farhang Jahanpour, “Iran Can’t Reform Itself” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (7 July 2011)

⁵⁴ Arash Aramesh, “Q&A: Student Activist Reports Massive Security Forces on Tehran Streets”. *Inside Iran* <http://www.insideiran.org/featured/qa-student-activist-reports-massive-security-forces-on-tehran->

Overall, state sponsored violence in the streets coupled with other intimidation tactics targeted ordinary Iranians as much as activists, prominent member of the opposition and even the Iranian Diaspora. Within weeks of the protests in 2009, the regime managed to defend the status quo through unprecedented violence against Iranian society and further expand the reach of its security apparatus to raise the stakes for participation in protest or any other form of political activism.⁵⁵

THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

In a Friday sermon one week after the elections, Khamenei set the tone by not only sanctioning the use of force against protesters but also holding the “leaders of the protests directly responsible”⁵⁶ Catering to his core conservative constituents, this sermon essentially legitimized violence against the emerging popular movement and unlike 1979, indicated a willingness to use force. This sermon and previous speeches supportive of Ahmadinejad as the winner, made Khamenei to essentially cast off the cloak as neutral arbiter. This new narrative represented a sea change in Iranian politics. Given Ali Khamenei’s lack of personal charisma and religious authority, his political survival had always rested on his aptitude to manipulate factional divides to his benefit. His decision to confront the opposition in such way caused him to no longer stand above the fray. What this meant for the emerging Green Movement, was that the regime had raised the stakes for dissent dramatically and essentially moved the Islamic Republic closer to single party rule. Politically, there are three main factors that thus far prevented the Green Movement to seriously threaten the status quo: (1) A reign of terror against protesters, activists, clerics and politicians alleged to be part of the opposition by means of show trials, torture, executions and televised confessions (2) Iran’s diffusion of political power

streets/ (15 February 2011) website accessed 28 December 2011

⁵⁵ see Farnaz Fassi, “Iranian Crackdown Goes Global” *The Wall Street Journal* (3 December 2009); <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125978649644673331.html>; Iason Athanasiadis, “Iran uses Internet as tool against protesters”, *The Christian Science Monitor* (4 January, 2010) <http://www.csmonitor.com/layout/set/print/content/view/print/271982>

⁵⁶ *Reuters* (19 June 2009); for IRGC Commander Mohammad Hejazi’s initial reaction to the sermon, calling the armed forces loyal to the Supreme Leader, but cautioning “that political leaders should not try to find supporters among the military forces”, stressing that “they do not interfere in political issues.” see *Javan*, (19 June, 2009) BBC Monitoring

and an inherent internal *shism* within the Green Movement about substance and direction of non-violent resistance (3) The International context of Iran's nuclear program and its foreign relations.

Faced with the most serious crisis of legitimacy since the Islamic Revolution, the leadership manipulated the protests as “foreign plots”,⁵⁷ and condemned members of the Green Movement and protesters as committing the Islamic crime of *moharebeh* (waging war against society and God, other common charges included “sedition and conspiracy against the Islamic Republic”).⁵⁸ The reign of terror that followed witnessed Soviet-style show trials of hundreds of protesters as well as high-ranking reformist politicians and clerics alike. Torture and murder in secret detention centers, forced televised confessions and recantations as well as summary executions created an unprecedented climate of fear amongst the grassroots and the elite in post-revolutionary Iran. As parliamentarians and other government officials continued to call for the execution of Moussavi and Karroubi for their “seditious activities”, authorities executed 446 persons in 2009 and over 600 between 2010 and 2011 alone.⁵⁹ The Ministry of Intelligence and other security agencies became the enforcers of regime loyalty and persecutors of reformists, using violence (including murder) and other means of intimidation to purge an entire faction.⁶⁰ Underwritten by a sophisticated security apparatus, which has effectively been policing dissent in public and online spheres as well as universities, the Iranian government has

⁵⁷ see statement by Kerman Province Governor-General Habibollah Dahmardeh: “[...] people who are stirring up trouble are induced by foreign radio stations and enemies, especially the Americans”. *ISNA* (17 June 2009); see also editorial in *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, (16 June 2009) BBC Monitoring

⁵⁸ Barndon Friedman, “Fitna in Iran But No Revolution” in *Iran Pulse* No. 44 (March 17, 2011); see *Kayhan* (23 July 2009), for the IRGC Commander's comments on reformist “seditious activities” see *E'temad* (21 July 2009) BBC Monitoring; The right to protest the outcome and bring a complaint before the judiciary was considered not legal by Guardian Council Spokesman Abbas Ali Kadkhoda'i *Islamic Republic News Agency*, (25 July 2009) BBC Monitoring

⁵⁹ see United Nations General Assembly, Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran *A/C.3/66/L.56* (27 October 2011), Human Rights Documentation Center, *IHRDC Chart of Executions by the Islamic Republic of Iran* <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/3420-executions-in-iran.html> (website accessed 29 December 2011); Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation <http://www.iranrights.org/english/newsletter.php> (website accessed 29 December 2011)

⁶⁰ Shaul Bakash, “The Security State and its Fractured Elites”, *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Middle East Program Occasional Paper Series* (Winter 2011), pp. 5-6; for violent attacks against former Vice President Mohammad Ali Abtahi and other former cabinet members of President Mohammad Khatami see Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *Iran Report* (6-2010), p.5; for the assassination attempt of Karroubi see Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *Iran Report* (07/2010), p. 5

morphed into a “barrack regime”, against which non-violent resistance bears tremendous costs for stakeholders of democracy and human rights with few tangible results other than moral superiority.⁶¹

Lacking a charismatic and truly independent leadership - Mousavi was one of the architects of the revolution after all – the opposition’s political capital largely drew on large scale acts of civil-disobedience as well as political heavyweights, like former President Khatami, Rafsanjani and deposed-heir to Khomeini, Ayatollah Montazeri. Having effectively eliminated the opposition student leadership in 1999, the protests for the first six months sustained as long as members of the political and clerical elite appeared to calling for radical political change. But, notwithstanding the regime’s effort to isolate the Green Movement from its base through smear campaigns and violence, there was a self-inflicted disconnect between the opposition’s leadership and the protesting youth. United by their opposition to the election outcome but lacking a consensus on the nature of political demands, the leaders of the opposition failed to attract a sustainable mass movement zealous enough to endure state-sponsored violence for a prolonged period. Rather than gradual reform of the *velayt-e faqih* as initially advocated by Mousavi, the momentum of the popular uprisings of 2009 was built on aspirations for democratic revolution.⁶² As members of the opposition were forced to publicly reaffirm their allegiance to the status quo, so did the Green Movement gradually loose its mass appeal. Most significantly, however, was the nature of Iran’s political system. Given the diffusion of power in the Islamic Republic, there are myriad factions vested in the maintenance of the status quo. Thus, unlike Tunisia or Libya where political power and control over the economy was concentrated in the hands of a ruling family or

⁶¹ For increased *Basij* presence on university campuses see Robert Worth, “Iran Expanding Effort to Stifle the Opposition” New York Times (23 November 2009) <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/world/middleeast/24iran.html?hp>; for an overview of internet filtering, mobile-communication restrictions and jamming of international satellite broadcasts in Iran see Shirin Ebadi and Hadi Ghaemi “Broadcasting Iran’s Repression” *The Wall Street Journal* (9 December 2011) http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204903804577079970310000322.html?mod=googlenews_wsj (website accessed 29 December 2011); for the EU’s strategy to help online activists see Deutsche Welle, EU vows to help online dissidents speak out (12 December 2011) <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,15595909,00.html> (website accessed 29 December 2011)

⁶² see Alex Vatanka, “Iran’s Green Movement Stalls”, *Jane’s Islamic Affairs Analyst* (26 September 2011)

tribe, Iran's maze of power centers "provided the flexibility needed to squelch challenges from below."⁶³

Lastly, the international environment proved largely conducive for the Iranian government. Notwithstanding, U.S., EU and UN sanctions against human rights violators and other efforts to back up the opposition, Iran's nuclear program and the perceived threat to regional and international security demanded continuous engagement between the West and Iran. In true realist fashion, Iran's internal turmoil was seen sign as a window of opportunity to extract concessions, essentially leading to the⁶⁴ first-ever high-level bilateral meeting between Washington and Tehran since 1979.⁶⁵ To Nobel Laureate, Shirin Ebadi, engaging Iran in order to project power and check its nuclear ambitions at the expense of meaningful human rights diplomacy largely provided the regime with legitimacy. As Ahmadinejad finds himself at the lowest popularity levels, she criticized, "Mr. Obama has extended the hand of friendship to a man who has blood on his hands [...] he can at least avoid shaking the hand of friendship with him."⁶⁶ Like his annual address before the UN General Assembly, high-level summitry negotiations on the nuclear program became showcase events for the Iranian president, just as the continuous intransigence on ceasing enrichment activities became diplomatic leverage to link it to entire array of strategic interests. Even though engagement turned into containment, in foreign policy terms, the popular uprisings that toppled U.S.-allied autocracies in the Middle East and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, largely strengthened Iran's role as anti-status quo power in the region. Notwithstanding Khamenei's claim that

⁶³ Steven Heydemann, "Why Tunisia and Not Iran", USIP – Iran Primer (25 January 2011) <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/jan/25/why-tunisia-and-not-iran> (website accessed 12 November 2011)

⁶⁴ As U.S. Secretary of Defense stated prior to negotiations in Geneva: "The Iranians are in a very bad spot now because of this deception" [disclosure of a secret underground nuclear facility], and said that Iran's still-contested presidential election had exposed "some fairly deep fissures in Iranian society and politics and - and probably even in the leadership" adding "And, frankly, this is one of the reasons why I think additional and especially severe economic sanctions could - could have some real impact." Politico Live (27 September 2009) http://www.politico.com/blogs/politicolive/0909/Gates_No_doubt_about_secret_Iran_nuke_facility_.html (website accessed 12 October 2011)

⁶⁵ see Bernd Kaussler, "From Geneva with Love: Breakthrough in U.S.-Iranian Relations?" (Washington, DC: *Foreign Policy In Focus*, October 30, 2009)

⁶⁶ Shirin Ebadi quoted in "Advice From an Iranian Nobel Laureate About Her Country" *The Washington Post* (15 October 2009) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/14/AR2009101403267.html> (website accessed 13 November 2011)

the Arab Spring was inspired by the Islamic Revolution,⁶⁷ the Iranian government managed to violently subdue renewed dissent at home, whilst championing the rights of disenfranchised Arab across North Africa and the Gulf. Essentially, the fall of pro-western dictatorship in the region caused a volatile quandary in which Arab states continue to seek to strengthen their strategic ties with the U.S. in order to check Iranian influence in the region and Tehran continues to engage in bellicose rhetoric and gunboat diplomacy.⁶⁸ Indeed, an emerging conflict with Iran would serve as the single remaining rallying point able to save the entrenched regime. Aware of the Iranian government's penchant for brinkmanship and what war would mean for human rights, a message of the "Network of Iranian Labor Associations" to "Amnesty International" in December 2011 read:

The recent attack on the British Embassy in Tehran should be seen as a warm-up for what is planned. They are preparing themselves for war. The bloodier, the better, from their perspective. It would be their savior, a lifeline to the regime. Under the circumstances, it would be sheer folly for either Israel or the United States to go to war with Iran. Why give the Islamic Republic's leaders a fresh lease on life when every visible sign points to a terminal state of being? [...] What would an attack on Iran achieve? It certainly cannot destroy the country's nuclear program. It would only set it back for a very short time while giving every pretext for that regime to resume it feverishly afterward. It would consolidate the regime for many years to come and it would radicalize the Arab Spring into a radical Islamic fundamentalist nightmare.⁶⁹

As the regime engaged in unprecedented violence against its own people, the domestic and international political environment too was effectively manipulated. Exploiting fissures within the Green Movement, which seemed unable or unwilling to adopt maximalist demands as well as Iran's maze of power centers, non-violent resistance at the grass-roots level proved unsustainable.

⁶⁷ In September 2001, the Iranian government hosted a conference "Islamic Awakening" with hundreds of scholars, clerics and religious activists from across the Muslim World. For Khamenei's key note address see *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1* (17 September 2011) BBC Monitoring

⁶⁸ For the Iranian Navy's first navigation of the Suez Canal since the Revolution see *Mehr News Agency*, (19 April 2011) Navy Commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari said Iran's naval forces will continue their powerful and strategic presence in the international waters. *Islamic Republic News Agency*, (24 April 2011). For IRGC Commander Hoseyn Salami's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz see *IRNA* (29 December 2011), *Mehr News Agency* (28 December 2011) BBC Monitoring

⁶⁹ Message from the Network of Iranian Labor Associations (NILA) to Amnesty International's Human Rights Day Event in Chicago on Human Rights in Iran "No To War" (9 December 2011) <http://iranlaborreport.com/?p=1722> (website accessed 27 December 2011)

CONCLUSION

The answer as to why Iran's non-violent movement has not succeeded in toppling the regime is multifaceted and points to several key variables. Despite the use of historic and proven techniques of civil disobedience, the Green Movement faced a formidable and ruthless enemy in a political environment, which is subject to a myriad of factions and competing interests.

Having politically neutered the regular armed forces, the IRGC and the *Basij* remained unchallenged in military terms and were, therefore, at the disposal of the beleaguered regime. Whether the elections were engineered in the Supreme Leader's Office or by the Revolutionary Guards Corps, the latter not only protected the status quo but also succeeded in renegotiating an increased stake in the country, essentially moving Iran closer to a praetorian state. The internal balance of power continues to favor the Revolutionary Guards.

The security forces, intelligence services and the judiciary, which employed a myriad of repressive tactics, largely underwrote the reign of terror subsequently unleashed by the regime. According to the UN General Assembly, they relied on following acts of political violence:

- (a) Harassment, intimidation and persecution, including by arbitrary arrest, detention or disappearance, of opposition members, journalists and other media representatives, bloggers, lawyers, clerics, human rights defenders, academics, students and others exercising their rights to peaceful assembly and association and freedom of opinion and expression, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries;
- (b) Use of violence and intimidation by Government-directed militias to forcibly disperse Iranian citizens engaged in the peaceful exercise of freedom of association, also resulting in numerous deaths and injuries;
- (c) Interfering in the right to a fair trial by, inter alia, holding mass trials and denying defendants access to adequate legal representation, resulting in death sentences and lengthy jail sentences for some individuals;
- (d) Reported use of forced confessions and abuse of prisoners including, inter alia, rape and torture;
- (e) Escalation in the rate of executions in the months following the elections;
- (f) Further restrictions on freedom of expression, including severe restrictions on media coverage of public demonstrations and the disruption of telecommunications and Internet technology and the forcible closure of the offices of several organizations involved in the investigation of the situation of persons imprisoned following the election;

(g) Arbitrary arrest and detention of employees of foreign embassies in Tehran, thereby unduly interfering with the performance of the functions of those missions in a manner inconsistent with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations;⁷⁰

The various stakeholders of non-violent resistance, labor syndicates and trade union members, clerical dissidents, intellectuals, human rights activists, reformist politicians and most importantly the country's youth found themselves suffering punishments in the streets and in detention as the leaders of the opposition failed to formulate a platform for radical political change. With the reformist elite unable and unwilling to challenge the status quo, the protesters' commitment to civil resistance never passed beyond showing moral superiority in the midst of brutal force. In the absence of nationwide strikes called on by the *bazaar* or other strategic socio-economic stakeholders, ordinary Iranians paid a heavy price for standing up for justice, dignity and freedom.

Thus far, the regime's manipulation of the nuclear program and the Arab Spring translated into enough foreign policy capital to maintain the status quo. However, by all accounts, the increased authoritarian political environment since 2009 seems unsustainable in the long term. In demographic and socio-economic terms, the regime is incapable of balancing the competing demands of the educated middle class and the effects of its crony-capitalist structures.⁷¹ The entire fabric of Iranian politics changed dramatically since the elections protests. Domestic and international audiences witnessed a popular challenge to the absolute authority of the jurisconsult and the subsequent repressive fall-out. To many observers, the opposition had actually achieved its goal as it essentially revealed the true face of the Islamic regime and stripped of its political legitimacy.⁷²

⁷⁰ United Nations General Assembly The Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran *United Nations A/C.3/64/L.37* (29 October 2009) United Nations General Assembly The Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran – Report of the Secretary General *United Nations A/64/357* (23 September, 2009)

⁷¹ As noted by Abrahamian before the protests in 2009: “This new stratum needs not only jobs and a decent standard of living but also greater social mobility and access to the outside world—with all its dangers, especially to well-protected home industries—and, concomitantly, the creation of a viable civil society.” Ervand Abrahamian “Why the Islamic Republic Has Survived” *MERIP – The Islamic Revolution* at 30 Vol. 39 (Spring 2009)

⁷² see Ramin Jahanbegloo, “Iran's Green Movement Has Actually Achieved its Goal” *The Christian Science Monitor*, (15 June, 2011)

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