



CRS Report for Congress

Iran: Profile and Statements of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

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Summary

On June 24, 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the presidency of Iran, in a run-off against the former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, where he also became the first non-cleric president in 24 years. This report covers his background; his victory over a well-known former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani; and his confrontational remarks about the West including Israel. 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 town 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 According to some, 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.

Ahmadinejad holds a Ph.D. in traffic and transport engineering from Tehran University of Science and Technology. He later became a lecturer at the university. He joined the revolutionary guards in 1986 after volunteering to serve in the war with Iraq.

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 Ahmedinejad can mean Muhammad's race or virtuous race. Robert Tait, "Humbling Beginning that Shaped Iran's New Hard Man: Ahmedinejad has tasted the poverty he wants to eradicate," *The Guardian* (Manchester, UK), July 2, 2005, p. 15.

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Reportedly, his Islamic credentials are said to be beyond challenge. 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.² In the 1980s, he reportedly served as a 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.³ 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" within Iran's Islamic society, and converted some municipal buildings to religious instruction sites. As mayor, he developed a reputation for incorruptibility, personal piety, and attentiveness to the needs of Tehran's lower class.

Election and Its Aftermath. Prior to his 2005 election to 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.

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

U.N. Sanctions. In response to U.N. sanctions, in 2006 and 2007, Ahmedinejad, on April 18, 2007, said that Iran's army was self-sufficient and would not be weakened by the sanctions. 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.⁴

² Robert Tait, "Pious populist ... presidential?," *The Guardian* (Manchester, UK), June 25, 2005.

³ Military section: Profile on Mohamoud Ahmadinejad at GlobalSecurity.org at [<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/ahmadinejad.htm>].

⁴ "Ahmadinejad Says Sanctions Will Not Harm Iran's Army," *Belfast Telegraph*, Belfast April 18, 2007, p.1.

Canceled 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. But 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, 2007.⁵ 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.⁶

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, on board a commercial airline.

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 2006.⁷

On his part, President Chavez has become a leading defender of Iran’s nuclear ambitions, charging the United States of 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 includes a deal that sees the two countries developing an international oil company.

Ahmedinejad 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, Ahmedinejad attended the inauguration ceremony of Ecuador’s new president, Rafael Correa, and met Bolivian leader Evo Morales. All are vocal critics of President Bush.⁸

⁵ “Ahmadinejad Calls Off Trip to US,” Voice of America News, March 23, 2007.

⁶ 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. A01.

⁷ *Agence France Presse*, “Iran president tours Latin America bolstering anti-US ties,” January 13, 2007.

⁸ *Boston Globe*, Iran leader courts Latin America allies, available at [<http://www.boston.com/>]

Ahmadinejad's Comments. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has made a series of remarks about Israel, Jews, and the Holocaust since he took office in 2005. His remarks as reported by the international media are as follows:

- 10/26/2005** 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."⁹
- 12/08/2005** Speaking at a press conference on the sidelines of an anti-terrorism summit of Islamic leaders in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, he said: "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."¹⁰ He also made the same comments on 12/14/05 at a speech in southeastern city of Zahedan.
- 4/24/2006** At a press conference in Tehran, he said: "Every German-born is indebted to the arrogant and greedy Zionists ... Sixty years after the war, why do the Palestinian people have to burn in the crimes of Zionists under the pretext of the Second World War?"¹¹
- 4/27/2006** In a speech in the western Iranian town of Zanjan, he said: "This regime (Israel) will one day vanish."¹²
- 5/11/2006** In a reference to Israel in a speech to students in Jakarta, given during a July-August 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, he said: "I advise them to pack up and move out of the region before being caught in the fire they have started in Lebanon."¹³

⁸ (...continued)

news/world/middleeast/articles/2007/01/15/iran_leader_courts_latin_america_allies].

⁹ Associated Press, "Ahmadinejad's recent comments on Israel and the Holocaust," December 14, 2005.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Agence France Presse*, "Iran president's statements on Israel: A selection of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial outbursts on Israel and the Jews," October 19, 2006.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

- 7/29/2006** In a speech reacting to Israel's offensive against Hezbollah, he said: "The real cure for the (Lebanon) conflict is elimination of the Zionist regime, but there should be first an immediate cease-fire."¹⁴
- 8/03/2006** Speaking at an Islamic summit in Putrajaya, Malaysia, he said: "The Zionist regime is fraudulent and illegitimate and cannot survive."¹⁵
- 10/19/2006** In a speech in Islamshahr, southwest of Tehran, he said: "This regime (Israel) will be gone, definitely. You (the Western powers) should know that any government that stands by the Zionist regime from now on will not see any result but the hatred of the people."¹⁶
- 12/11/2006** At Ahmadinejad's urging, 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.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Agence France Presse*, "Iran president's statements on Israel: A selection of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial outbursts on Israel and the Jews," October 20, 2006.