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Axis of hardliners: From Tehran to Washington

The huge gap between Tehran and Washington has widened in recent months. Top officials of Iran and the United States are not even within shouting distance. The styles of rhetoric differ, but the messages in both directions are filled with hostility. While visiting Iran's capital in early summer, during the home stretch of the presidential campaign, I was struck by paradoxes. From all appearances, most Iranians despise the U.S. government but love Americans. Repression, imposed from above, coexists with freedom taken from below. The press is largely dogmatic, but some media outlets show appreciable independence.

I was fascinated to observe a rally of 10,000 people who gathered in a Tehran stadium to vocally support a reform candidate for the presidency, Mostafa Moin. One speaker after another called for political freedom. The Tehran Times reported that Moin was promoting "a Democracy and Human Rights Front in Iran to defend the rights of all Iran's religious and ethnic groups, the youth, academicians, women, and political opposition groups." That seems like a long time ago. The Moin campaign didn't make it into the runoff. And the wily Iranian power broker Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president with centrist inclinations, lost his deep-pockets bid to return to his old job.

Since taking office, the triumphant presidential contender, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has provided ample evidence that he is a reactionary zealot. While not a cleric himself, Ahmadinejad is aligned with fundamentalist ayatollahs whose agenda includes continuing to suppress the rights of women. And the president's foreign-policy views are also grim. In late October he twice expressed a wish to "wipe Israel off the map."

At the same time — despite the impression routinely left by U.S. media accounts — Iran is far from monolithic. Ahmadinejad's recent statements about Israel, which came in the form of approvingly quoting the Islamic Republic's founder Ayatollah Khomeini, caused an uproar in Iran. "The reason is that Iran has changed since Khomeini," the insightful British journalist Peter Beaumont explained in the London-based Observer. "Despite the continued grip on power by institutions set up by Khomeini, a large part of its youthful population has made complex accommodations between life lived in

public and private. That has masked the loosening of those institutions' grip on the individual. The newly resurgent hardliners, with their strongest support among the poor and ill-educated, are now trying to reimpose that grip."

Those hardliners in Tehran are benefitting from other nationalistic ideologues — in Washington. When President Bush denounced Iran's election campaign as meaningless while it was still underway, there was palpable resentment in Iran, and not just among pro-government propagandists. I talked with reform-minded Iranians who were angered by Bush's declaration. They saw bombast from Washington as red meat that was much appreciated by Iran's fundamentalist rulers.

Between the hardliners in Tehran and Washington, there is a love — or at least mutual justification — that dares not speak its name. The more belligerent Iran gets, the more administration officials in Washington use that belligerency to justify their own. And vice versa.

On Nov. 2, the Tehran government announced the removal of 40 Iranian diplomats from their posts abroad; Reuters described some as "supporters of warmer ties with the West." No one could doubt that the Bush administration would cite the news as further justification for Washington's increasingly threatening stance toward Iran.

The overt flashpoint of tensions between Tehran and Washington has to do with Iran's atomic program. Stripping away the propaganda from both sides, it seems fair to say that the Iranians are pursuing nuclear power development for electricity while keeping their options open for nuclear weapons later on.

By any credible estimate, Iran could not build an atomic bomb before the end of this decade. The Iranian government is allowing U.N. inspections but asserting its right to process uranium. Given the U.S. government's relentless hypocrisies and geopolitical agendas — including a covetous eye on Iran's enormous quantities of oil and natural gas — there's big trouble ahead.

An Associated Press story, appearing in newspapers on Nov. 3, noted that "Washington is pressing for Tehran to be referred to the U.N. Security Council, where it could face sanctions for violating the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty." Such news accounts rarely mention that Israel — which has a nuclear arsenal estimated at 200 warheads — cannot be accused of violating that treaty because Israel has never been willing to sign it. The same is true of Pakistan and India, two other nuclear-weapons states also embraced by Uncle Sam.

American media coverage of Iran is often driven by righteousness that detours around U.S. double standards. That may seem professional. But we're much better off when journalists strive for independence.