



Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center



Highlights of the week

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Iranian media and British elections: political crisis in Britain emphasized amidst speculations on possible repercussions on Iran

The elections in Britain, which ended without a clear winner last week, generated considerable interest from Iranian media. Alongside informative reports on the elections and their results, media affiliated with government supporters in the conservative camp have tried to emphasize the gravity of the political crisis in Britain. Several news websites have also discussed the possible repercussions of the British elections on the Middle East and on Iran in particular.

Iranian media reports mostly agreed on the main reasons for the defeat of the Labour Party: its failures in foreign policy and the economic crisis. The reformist daily Sharq blamed the Labour Party's defeat on two main factors: the first is the "adventurous" foreign policy of Prime Minister Tony Blair and his unquestioning obedience to the strategy of former US president George Bush. According to Sharq, that policy made it impossible for Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who tried to distance himself from the US and reduce British involvement in Iraq, to change the British public's views on his party. The other factor responsible for the Labour's defeat, according to Sharq, is the severe economic crisis in the country (Sharq, May 9). The daily Resalat also blamed the defeat of the Labour on the economic crisis and on the British military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, which, according to the daily, ruined Britain's international image and cast it as a proxy of the US (Resalat, May 8).

Iranian commentators were split on the effect of the election results on Britain's foreign policy towards Iran. According to one expert, the election results do not serve Iran's interests. In an interview granted by Dr. Ali Bigdeli to the Farda news website, the foreign policy expert said that British conservatives hold radical views towards the Orient in general and Muslims in particular, predicting that in light of their radical religious views, no improvement in Iranian-British relations is forthcoming. He even referred to the conservatives as part of a "conservative Christian-Zionist camp" headquartered in the US (Farda, May 8).

Dr. Majid Tafreshi, a historian and commentator on British affairs, had a different view in an interview granted to the Iranian Diplomacy website. Addressing the British policy towards Iran, Tafreshi said that compared to the Labour Party, which follows a critical policy towards Iran, the conservative party espouses a somewhat different view. This has a lot to do with the influence of parliament member and foreign finance minister on behalf of the conservative party, Norman Lamont, who is currently the head of the British-Iranian commerce association and supports improving the relations between the two countries (Diplomasi-ye Irani, May 9).



Demonstration in front of the British embassy in Tehran, November 2009

About one year after the outbreak of the riots in Iran, which were also widely covered by British media, government-supporting media saw in the British elections a chance to “strike back” at Britain. The conservative media emphasized Western media reports on confrontations which broke out between British demonstrators and security forces after the election results were published. The official news agency IRNA reported on thousands of British demonstrators in various cities protesting against the “unfair” election system and demanding political reforms (IRNA, May 8). Fars news agency also extensively covered the public protest in Britain, going as far as to report on British citizens using online social networks to protest against the election procedure and to claim that the authorities had prevented citizens who came to the polls from exercising their right to vote (Fars, May 7). At the same time, the conservative daily Keyhan reported that hundreds of civilians demonstrated in London demanding to put former prime minister Tony Blair to trial on charges of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan (Keyhan, May 8).

On the other hand, Alef, a website affiliated with the pragmatic conservative camp, criticized the comparison between the political situation in Britain and the situation in Iran following the presidential elections. A commentary published on the website this week says that the political circumstances in the two countries are completely different. According to the website, it is only natural that Iranians should have bitter memories about Britain’s long-standing imperialistic involvement in Iran and from the BBC’s hostile stance towards Iran. However, there is no basis for comparison between the political situations in the two countries. The website listed several important differences between the election campaigns in Britain and in Iran: no claims of election forgery were made in Britain; no senior government official served in Britain’s election committee; none of the British candidates announced their victory on the election day and all the candidates waited for the official results to be made public; in Britain interested candidates express their reservations about the election results by presenting documents rather than by urging their supporters to take to the streets; in Britain the victorious candidate does not use his victory speech to incite against his enemies; in Britain those who object to the election results, those who incite, and those who disrupt public order are not permitted to attack positions of security forces and destroy public property; in Britain the former president’s children do not incite the opposition to protest in an illegal manner. The website suggested learning from the experience of other countries, including even Britain, in order to improve Iran’s political system and election procedure. For example, Alef suggested guaranteeing the election system’s independence from the government; prohibiting the media and the candidates from publishing election results before voting is over; preventing members of the Guardian Council from serving in government institutions; making sure that the election procedure, the vote counting, the election

monitoring, and the publication of the results are transparent; and making sure that the candidates adhere to the law, to Islam, and to morality during the election campaign and TV debates (Alef, May 8).

Debate in Tehran's Amirkabir University offers a glimpse into intellectuals' views on policy towards Israel, Palestinians, and Lebanon

A debate between two leading Iranian intellectuals was held in Amirkabir University this week. The debate between Professor Sadegh Zibakalam and Professor Mohammad-Reza Marandi offered a fascinating glimpse into concerns brought up since the 90s on the periphery of Iranian intellectual debate on the country's policy towards Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as into the tension between revolutionary ideological views and national political interests in Iran's foreign policy.

Professor Sadegh Zibakalam is one of the leading reformist intellectuals and political commentators, and a lecturer on political science in Tehran University. In recent years, Zibakalam has repeatedly voiced strong criticism against the policy of the regime, including the foreign and nuclear policy of the Iranian leadership. Professor Mohammad-Reza Marandi is a researcher from Tehran's Shahid Beheshti University and a leading political commentator affiliated with conservative circles in Iran. The debate held between them this past Monday (May 10) dealt with Iran's support of the Palestinians and of Lebanon, and was widely covered by Iranian media.

During the debate, Zibakalam brought up a fundamental issue: should Iran support Palestinian and Lebanese radical groups just because they are Muslim and/or Shi'ite, or should it formulate its policy towards them based only on national interests? He questioned Iran's stated commitment to the struggle of Muslims worldwide, claiming that, in fact, Iran does not assist Muslims struggling in China or in Chechnya due to its commitment to national interests involving its relations with those countries. The implication is that Iran acts according to its national interests, and that it must therefore consider its policy of supporting the Palestinians and Lebanon on the basis of those interests. If there ever comes a day when that policy does not coincide with Iran's national interests, it will have to reassess its policy.

Zibakalam expressed his opinion that Iran's considerable investment in Lebanon and Palestine does not serve Iran's interests. Many believe, he pointed out, that this investment is designed to support Iran's offensive strategy in its struggle against Israel, and to let it take the initiative. According to Zibakalam, he accepts the principle saying that if Israel is a strategic enemy, efforts must be made to move the confrontation with it to its borders by supporting

Palestinian and Lebanese radical groups. He wondered, however, whether Iran's view of Israel as a strategic enemy and its desire to eliminate it were justified. In that, he said, Iran's stance is "more Palestinian than the Palestinians". If the Palestinians themselves recognize Israel and its legitimacy, Iran cannot take a contradicting view and call for the destruction of Israel. The slogan calling for the destruction of the State of Israel—while the major discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict focuses on the need to establish two independent countries—is wrong and detrimental to Iran's national interests.

The leading reformist intellectual added that the ongoing analysis in Iran of the roots of the establishment of the State of Israel is fundamentally flawed, since it is based on the assumption that the establishment of Israel only has to do with the interests of Western countries, ignoring the fact that Israel is the product of a centuries-old historical struggle of the Jewish people. Zibakalam shortly went over the history of the Jewish people and the Zionist movement, arguing that the establishment of Israel cannot be understood without understanding the history of the Jews in Europe in the past two thousand years, particularly since the 19th century. In that context, Zibakalam referred to the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust as a historical fact.



Mohammad-Reza Marandi agreed with Zibakalam's assertion that the foreign policy of any country, including Iran, must be based on interests. He noted, however, that a country's interests cannot be confined only to the material—rather, they must also serve spiritual and ideological functions, and must be both short-term and long-term. He said that while there are sometimes contradictions in Iran's foreign policy when it comes to supporting the struggle of Muslims in various places worldwide, those contradictions exist only on the tactical level, not on the strategic level.

Iran is not the only country in the world that protects its national interests also outside of its borders, and many countries invest considerable resources in other countries to realize their interests, said Marandi. Iran's investment in Lebanon and Palestine stems from its desire to

preserve its influence and power in the region, and its policy towards Palestine and Lebanon cannot be compared to its policy in China and Chechnya, since it stems from different interests. Furthermore, Israel is an illegitimate country that cannot be compared, for example, to China.

Regarding the existence of the State of Israel, Marandi said that the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 may offer clues about the future of Israel. He noted that even in Israel there are people who believe that it will cease to exist in about a decade. According to Marandi, the establishment of Israel has to do with material interests of Western countries, which sought to secure their influence in the region by establishing Israel.

Speaking about the Holocaust, Marandi reiterated the familiar stance of Iranian authorities, strongly criticized the attitude towards Holocaust denial in European countries, and noted that Western countries' views on the Holocaust reflect the depth of Zionist influence in those countries (Fars, May 11).

International book fair in Tehran: no criticism against the regime, Zen philosophy, or Holocaust confirmation

The 23rd international book fair was launched in Tehran last week amidst severe restrictions imposed by the Islamic Guidance Ministry on the participation of publishers and on the contents of the books exhibited at the fair. Banned works include the writings of two major clerics affiliated with the reformist camp: Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, a senior reformist cleric who passed away last December; and Ayatollah Yousef Sane'i, as well as the liberal cleric and intellectual Mohsen Kadivar, considered to be one of the strongest critics of the regime who currently resides outside of Iran.

Also prohibited from taking part in the fair was the Foundation for the Preservation and Publication of the Works and Reflections of Ayatollah Beheshti. Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti was one of the leaders of the Islamic revolution in 1979, who died in a terrorist attack perpetrated in June 1981 at the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) offices by the Mojahedin-e Khalq opposition organization. His son, Seyyed Ali-Reza Beheshti, the head of the foundation for the publication of his father's writings, served as one of the senior advisors of reformist opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi and was arrested twice following the riots which broke out in Iran after the presidential elections.

Other authors whose works were banned in the fair are Houshang Golshiri (1938-2000), Abbas Ma'rufi, and the famous poet Forough Farrokhzad. The poems of Farrokhzad (1935-1967), considered one of the most influential Iranian poets in the 20th century, were also

taken out of a book recently published in Iran which included the works of Iranian poets. The organizers of the book fair also did not permit to show a poster featuring a photograph of the important poet (Jaras, May 7-8).

Tabnak, a website affiliated with the pragmatic conservative camp, reported this week that the organizers of the book fair also banned books on issues considered to be sensitive or controversial in Iran. Iranian and foreign publishers taking part in the book fair were prohibited from showing books on the Baha'i faith and on Zen philosophy, books referring to Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism or to Hamas as a terrorist organization, or books claiming that the Holocaust of European Jewry did occur. Also banned were books using the term "Arab Gulf" instead of "Persian Gulf" (Tabnak, May 7). This last issue provoked an incident which took place at the fair last weekend, when the security forces shut down the Egyptian booth for exhibiting an Arabic-language book called "The Encyclopedia of the Arab Gulf".

On the opening of the book fair, Mohsen Parviz, the deputy minister of Islamic guidance for culture affairs and also the head of the book fair, warned that Intelligence Ministry agents will be present at the fair to prevent it from being used for political needs. He denied, however, that political factors were involved in the decision about publishers' participation in the fair. He confirmed that several publishers were denied participation in the fair, noting, however, that the decision was motivated by offenses committed by several publishers in book fairs held in previous years. Out of 2032 publishers registered for the fair, the Islamic Guidance Ministry authorized the participation of 1915 (Jaras, May 7).



Last week, the Iranian Association of Writers issued a special memorandum of opinion condemning the restrictions imposed by the authorities on publishers' participation in the international book fair. According to the memorandum, the censorship policy and the restrictions on book publishing in Iran are nothing new; however, this year the number of publishers banned from the fair was unprecedentedly large, with some of them even summoned for questioning. According to the Association of Writers, it is a major blow to

freedom of expression, reflecting the increasing pressure on independent publishers and the escalation of censorship and cultural oppression in Iran (Jaras, May 8). The book fair is scheduled to continue until May 15.

It should be noted that every book published in Iran is required to receive an authorization from the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. The permit granting procedure for new books can last months and even years. In recent years, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance has once again tightened book censorship and considerably decreased the number of permits for publishing new books as part of the campaign to enforce the Islamic code.

Telecommunications cables stolen from various locations in Tehran after last week's theft of bronze statues

Several days after media reports on the theft of over ten bronze statues in Tehran, this week Iranian media reported on a rash of thefts of telecommunications cables from various locations in the city. This rash of thefts also appears to be linked to the activity of metal thieves.

In at least four separate incidents reported this week, several hundreds of meters of telecommunications cables were stolen, cutting off thousands of landline telephone users in Tehran. Cables were stolen last Wednesday night from the telecommunications center in Tehran's area 7, cutting off 4,000 users in that area. Shortly afterwards, an additional 5,000 users were cut off when cables were stolen from the telecommunications center in area 8. Then, a botched theft attempt cut off 3,000 more customers. Furthermore, high-speed Internet connections in one of Tehran's areas went down when 15 meters of cables were stolen last Thursday night.



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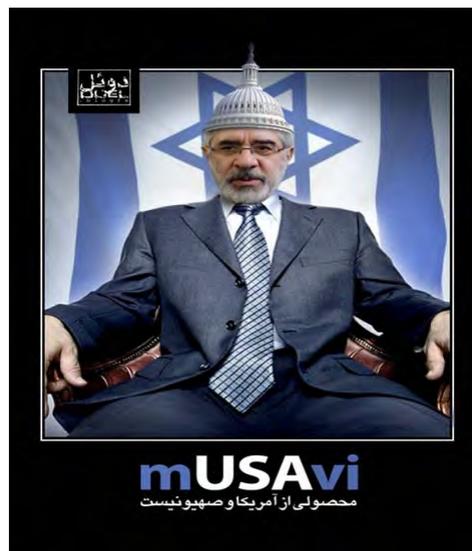
The Tehran Province telecommunications company confirmed that some cables were indeed cut and stolen. The Tehran police informed this week that two young men were arrested for alleged involvement in the cable theft.

Mohammad Khojasteh, the PR director of the Tehran Province telecommunications company, informed this week that the service interruptions in the areas where cables were stolen lasted from 48 to 72 hours. Another senior official in the telecommunications company estimated the direct damage from the cable theft at 56 million tomans (about 56 thousand dollars) at the very least.

Pictures of the week: reformist opposition as depicted on an ultra-conservative blog



The major enemies: there is nothing but Zionism behind the scenes of the “incitement faction”



Mousavi: a product of the US and of Zionism

From the Iranian blog duel.blogfa.com