



The Meir Amit Intelligence
and Terrorism Information Center

Spotlight on Iran

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Highlights of the week

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- ✓ Different voices on nuclear issue: exiled reformist cleric calls for public debate on nuclear issue
- ✓ Government to remove three zeroes from local currency (rial) as inflation rises again
- ✓ Britain's Royal Society: Iran has world's fastest-growing number of scientific publications

Riots in Syria as product of Western plot: Iranian media on Syria developments

This past week, most of Iran's conservative media have continued to provide highly limited coverage of the riots in Syria. In contrast to the extensive coverage of the events in Bahrain, Egypt, and Libya, the Iranian media almost completely ignored the events in Syria, covered in more detail only by reformist opposition-affiliated media.

In the few reports on the happenings in Syria, Iranian news agencies claimed that it was the U.S. and Israel that instigated the riots as part of a premeditated plan to hit Syria for its support of the resistance camp.

Last week, the conservative website Alef responded to the claims brought up by some of its readers about the Iranian media ignoring the events in Syria. The website questioned the reliability of Western reports on the Syrian riots, claiming that if the riots in Syria were popular rather than driven by foreign powers, the Iranian media would treat them the way it treated the riots in Yemen, Egypt, and Bahrain.

Extraordinary criticism about the disregard of Iran's official media for the events in Syria was published on Asr-e Iran, a website affiliated with the pragmatic conservative bloc. A commentary article published by the website says that the developments in Syria are highly significant for Iran in view of the strategic relations between the two countries, and that they cannot therefore be ignored. The website even strongly criticized human rights violations in Syria and the hereditary power transfer from Hafez Assad to his son Bashar.

Different voices on nuclear issue: exiled reformist cleric calls for public debate on nuclear issue

Reformist cleric Hojjat-ol-Eslam Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, currently in exile in Germany, published an extraordinary article last week warning about the dangers of Iran's nuclear facilities and calling for a public debate about those dangers.

In the article, published on Jaras, a website affiliated with the supporters of reformist opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Eshkevari claims that the earthquake in Japan and its impact on the nuclear reactors in Fukushima have demonstrated the need to examine the safety of Iran's nuclear facilities. Since Iran, according to Eshkevari, is ruled by a tyrannical government that follows an adventurous policy, there is no guarantee that required security protocols are maintained in its nuclear facilities.

Eshkevari criticized Western governments for focusing their criticism against Iran's nuclear program on its drive for nuclear weapons, claiming that the debate should focus on the lack of sufficient guarantees for the safety of Iranian nuclear facilities under the current political conditions. He called on intellectuals, peace activists, and environmentalists in Iran and elsewhere to launch a campaign to increase awareness of the safety of Iran's nuclear facilities.

Meanwhile, Naser Rastkhah, deputy chief of the Atomic Energy Organization, reported this week that his organization recently installed two systems to warn about radiation threats and monitor radiation levels in Iran's nuclear facilities. One of the systems has recently been deployed in 50 cities across the country and is supposed to warn about radiation levels through stations that constantly monitor gamma rays and relay the data to the Atomic Energy Organization headquarters in Tehran.

Public debate on the nuclear issue is practically prohibited in Iran. In recent years, however, other voices on the nuclear issue have been heard from intellectuals and a few reformist academia members, including Prof. Sadegh Zibakalam and Dr. Ahmad Shirzad.

Government to remove three zeroes from local currency (rial) as inflation rises again

Economy Minister Shamsoldin Hosseini has announced earlier this week that, during the coming year, the government intends to implement the plan to remove three zeroes from the local currency (rial). According to the minister, the plan will be implemented once necessary measures are completed and maximum price stability has been achieved.

In response to the minister's announcement, Mohammad Nahavandian, the head of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, said that removing the zeroes could not replace a true fight on inflation, adding that as long as Iran is afflicted with "chronic inflation", there is need for real action rather than cosmetic changes such as removing zeroes.

The plan to remove zeroes from the local currency was brought up about two years ago as part of the efforts to deal with the inflation crisis that has severely devalued the Iranian currency in recent years.

Meanwhile, the Central Bank has reported this week that in the previous Persian year (1389, ended on March 20, 2011), the inflation rose by 12.4 percent. This represents an increase in the inflation rate compared to 1388 (March 2009-March 2010), when it stood at 10.8 percent. The new increase in inflation reflects the price increase following the launch of the subsidy policy reform in the last months of 1389.

Britain's Royal Society: Iran has world's fastest-growing number of scientific publications

A report published last week by the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge ranks Iran 1st in growth of scientific publications. According to the report, which discusses scientific cooperation in the world, the number of scientific publications released in Iran between 1996-2008 increased by a factor of 18. The authors of the report attribute the significant increase in the number of scientific publications to the Iranian authorities' decision to implement a program to advance science, focusing on higher education and closer cooperation between local industry and academia.

The report also states that despite the political tension between the U.S. and Iran, there has been a considerable increase in publications co-authored by researchers from these two countries.

A report published in July 2010 by the Yuval Ne'eman Science, Technology, and Security Workshop at Tel-Aviv University also indicates an unusual increase in the number of scientific publications released by Iranian researchers. The report argues, however, that the quality of Iran's scientific publications is still low. According to the author of the report, this situation has a lot to do with a deliberate government policy encouraging a large number of publications even at the expense of their quality, although there are some indications of change in the policy.

Riots in Syria as product of Western plot: Iranian media on Syria developments

This past week, most of Iran's conservative media have continued to provide highly limited coverage of the riots in Syria. In contrast to the extensive coverage of the events in Bahrain, Egypt, and Libya, the Iranian media almost completely ignored the events in Syria, covered in more detail only by reformist opposition-affiliated media. Conservative media did report, however, a support rally for President Bashar Assad held in Damascus last week.

As riots broke out in Syria, the official news agency IRNA referred to the demonstrators as unruly rioters seeking to undermine public order and cause damage to private property, claiming that the Syrian government was forced to take the necessary measures to restore order. In addition, Iranian news agencies claimed that the U.S. and Israel were behind the latest riots. Last weekend, IRNA cited a report that had first appeared on Syrian TV,

according to which one of the demonstrators detained by Syrian security forces was an American of Egyptian descent, who had admitted during questioning that he was assisted by Syria's enemies, including Israel, to compromise Syrian security (IRNA, March 27).

Mehr News Agency also reported, citing official Syrian sources, that it was the U.S. and Israel that instigated the riots in Syria as part of a premeditated plan to hit Syria for its support of the resistance camp. According to the news agency, the time and place of the riots were carefully chosen by Western countries to destabilize the regime in Damascus. Even if there is some justification for the economic and political demands of Syrian citizens, says a commentary article published by Mehr, the events in Syria are exploited by questionable elements to turn Syrians against their government and cause a political crisis that will serve Israel's interests. The article further claims that those who took part in the riots have nothing to do with the values and principles of the "Syrian nation of resistance" and that the Syrian regime has documents showing that people from Arab and non-Arab countries took part in the riots and fired at civilians and security forces.

The instability in Syria does not serve the Syrian people, Mehr claimed, but rather its enemies: the U.S., Israel, and those Arab countries seeking to force it into submission. The Syrian people have proven, however, that they will not back down from their anti-Zionist positions and that Syria will continue supporting anti-Israeli resistance despite the schemes concocted by the enemies of the resistance front (Mehr, March 28).

Last week, the conservative website Alef published a commentary article in response to the claims brought up by some of its readers about the Iranian media ignoring the recent events in Syria.

The website claimed that if the riots in Syria were popular rather than driven by foreign powers, the Iranian media would treat them the way it treated the riots in Yemen, Egypt, and Bahrain. The website questioned the reliability of Western media reports on the events in Syria, claiming they reflected the objectives and tendencies of Western media, seeking to exaggerate the extent of the riots. According to Alef, while Western media provided extensive coverage of the riots in Syria, they almost completely ignored the crimes committed by the Saudi soldiers recently sent to suppress the riots in Bahrain. In March 14-20, the two Western news agencies AP and Reuters released 39 reports about the happenings in Syria, compared to only 9 reports on the events in Yemen and Bahrain. This is similar, according to Alef, to the Western media's biased coverage of the 2005 Iranian presidential campaign, which completely ignored conservative candidates and reported alleged extensive support for reformist candidate Mostafa Mo'in and projected him as winner.

The website added that it is only natural that Iran should support its ally, Syria, which faces their two common enemies, the U.S. and Israel, and assists Lebanese and Palestinian resistance movements. Hinting at reformist media that widely covered the riots in Syria, Alef noted that those who are glad and content to report on the order violations in Syria are probably not aware of Syria's strategic importance for Iran, since the policy of that country helps keep Iran's enemies away from its borders. The Iran-Syria alliance against the West and Israel should not result in disregard for the reality in Syria, the article says, and violations of the freedom of expression in Syria are as unfortunate as they are in other Arab countries. One must not forget, however, that those who preach democracy and human rights have ignored the events in Bahrain in recent weeks, and that Western countries benefit the most from the order violations in Syria and will do everything to kindle them (Alef, March 26).

Extraordinary criticism about the disregard of Iran's official media for the events in Syria was published on Asr-e Iran, a website affiliated with the pragmatic moderate bloc. A commentary article published by the website says that the developments in Syria are highly significant for Iran in view of the strategic relations between the two countries, and that they cannot therefore be ignored. The website argued that not only is there no difference between the suppression of individual freedoms in Syria and the situation in other Arab countries, the situation in Syria is in fact even more dire than in most of the Arab world. The website even expressed reservations about the fact that while Syria is defined as a republic, Bashar Assad inherited power from his father, Hafez. The website also wondered why Iran's English and Arabic media reported on the riots in Syria while the Persian-language broadcasting ignored them. According to Asr-e Iran, even official Syrian media and Hezbollah media in Lebanon did not ignore the riots, making it unclear why Iran Broadcasting preferred to ignore the events in Syria and even completely ignored the Syrian security forces' attack on unarmed demonstrators in a mosque in the city of Daraa, in which 20 people were killed. The website mentioned that the riots which broke out in Iran following the presidential elections in the summer of 2009 were covered by Syrian media.

Referring to the claim that Iran must not take measures that may compromise Syria due to its support for Iran and the resistance in Lebanon and Syria, Asr-e Iran said that this support has to do with national Syrian interests. Informing the Iranian public about the internal situation in Syria does not harm the Syrian government, instead being a measure aimed to increase Iranian citizens' awareness of the developments in this important country. According to the website, Iran Broadcasting's disregard for the events in Syria undermines the Iranian public's trust in official media, forcing Iranians to go to other media to get the information they want (Asr-e Iran, March 29).

Different voices on nuclear issue: exiled reformist cleric calls for public debate on nuclear issue

Reformist cleric Hojjat-ol-Eslam Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, currently in exile in Germany, published an extraordinary article last week warning about the dangers of Iran's nuclear facilities and calling for a public debate about those dangers.

In the article, published on Jaras, a website affiliated with the supporters of reformist opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Eshkevari claims that the earthquake in Japan and its impact on the nuclear reactors in Fukushima have demonstrated the need to examine the safety of Iran's nuclear facilities. Japan is an advanced country that allows internal and external public monitoring of its nuclear facilities; therefore, Eshkevari says, one can safely assume that it has taken the necessary measures to secure its nuclear facilities. In a country like Iran, however, there is no guarantee for the nuclear facilities to be immune to devastating impact of natural disasters.

The threat to world peace, according to the reformist cleric, has nothing to do with the question of whether Iran intends to produce nuclear weapons, but rather with the safety of its nuclear facilities, which pose a threat to people in Iran, in the region, and elsewhere in the world. Since Iran, according to Eshkevari, is ruled by a tyrannical government that follows an adventurous policy, there is no guarantee that required security protocols are maintained in its nuclear facilities, or that they are properly monitored to keep them safe.

In the article, Eshkevari criticized Western governments for focusing their criticism against Iran's nuclear program on its drive for nuclear weapons. The international community's objections to the nuclear program are based on political and economic interests rather than the human aspects involving the safety of the nuclear facilities and their impact on the environment and the lives and health of Iranians. Instead of being a political issue, the question should involve protecting the environment and the lives of human beings. The criticism, according to Eshkevari, should not be focused on Iran's right for nuclear energy under the simplistic slogan "Nuclear energy is our inalienable right" used by the Islamic republic for PR needs, or on Iran's need to achieve scientific progress and harness nuclear technology. The debate on Iran's nuclear program should be focused on the lack of proper guarantees to ensure the safety of its nuclear facilities under the current political conditions. When there is no democracy, internal and external monitoring, and a responsible government in Tehran, a nuclear disaster in Iran is a rather likely scenario.

At a time where in many countries around the globe, including such democratic and industrial nations as Germany, there has been growing opposition to nuclear programs and calls to shut

down nuclear reactors, it is necessary to focus rather on the threats posed by the nuclear programs of such countries as Iran, Pakistan, and Israel—as they are unmonitored, they are cause for much greater concern.



Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari (Jaras)

Eshkevari called on Iranian peace and environment activists to launch a campaign to express their criticism of Iran's nuclear facilities and increase public awareness about the dangers associated with their safety. It is time for intellectuals and peace and justice activists worldwide holding various political and social views to pay attention to this issue and cooperate to prevent a possible disaster. Such a campaign, according to Eshkevari, can also be based on religious views, since the large religions dictate a duty of environment conservation and prevention of damage to nature (Jaras, March 29).

Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari is considered one of the most important reformist thinkers in recent years. He was sentenced to seven years in prison on charges of sedition after taking part (with other major Iranian reformist activists) in a political conference in Berlin in 2000. He was released from prison in 2005. Even after his release, Eshkevari continued strongly criticizing the Iranian regime and currently resides in Germany.

Meanwhile, Naser Rastkhah, deputy chief of the Atomic Energy Organization and head of its nuclear safety center, reported this week that the organization recently installed two systems to warn about radiation threats and monitor radiation levels in Iran's nuclear facilities.

Speaking at a conference held at the Atomic Energy Organization headquarters in Tehran, Rastkhah said that the nuclear safety center had recently launched a new system to warn about radiation threats from the nuclear facilities in Tehran or in neighboring countries. It was first deployed in 13 Iranian cities, including Tehran and Bushehr, and recently expanded to 50 cities across the country. The system is supposed to warn about radiation levels through stations that constantly monitor gamma rays and relay the data to the Atomic Energy

Organization headquarters in Tehran. It operates on optic fibers and is not connected to the internet (ISNA, April 4).

Public debate on the nuclear issue is practically prohibited in Iran. Even after the earthquake in Japan, Iranian media avoided any discussion on the safety of the country's nuclear facilities in case of an earthquake. In recent years, however, other voices on the nuclear issue have been heard from intellectuals and a few reformist academia members, including Prof. Sadegh Zibakalam and Dr. Ahmad Shirzad.

Government to remove three zeroes from local currency (rial) as inflation rises again

Economy Minister Shamsoldin Hosseini has announced earlier this week that, during the coming year, the government intends to implement the plan to remove three zeroes from the local currency (rial). Hosseini noted that the package of economic decisions taken by the Central Bank and the government to reduce expenses and increase the stability of the banking and financial system includes the removal of three zeroes from the rial. According to the minister, the plan will be implemented once necessary measures are completed and maximum price stability has been achieved (Fars, April 3).

The plan to remove zeroes from the local currency was brought up about two years ago as part of the efforts to deal with the inflation crisis that has severely devalued the Iranian currency in recent years. Last year, the deputy governor of Iran's Central Bank estimated that the current buying power of a 10,000-rial bill (about one dollar) was equal to that of 25 rials 30 years ago. In light of the significant increase in Iran's inflation rate in recent years, the Central Bank was forced to print 50,000 and 100,000-rial bills.

In August 2008, the government established a special committee to examine the effects of a monetary reform under which three or four zeroes would be removed from the local currency. Members of the committee included over 50 economists, academia members, and executives. In early 2010, President Ahmadinejad reported that the plan to remove three zeroes was finalized but did not specify a date for its implementation.

Supporters of the plan claim that the removal of the zeroes will have a positive effect on curbing inflation, similarly to other countries that implemented a similar program, like Turkey. Opponents of the plan claim, however, that without a change in the government's economic policy the reform would have no real effect on curbing inflation, and that Turkey only reformed its local currency after bringing inflation under control.



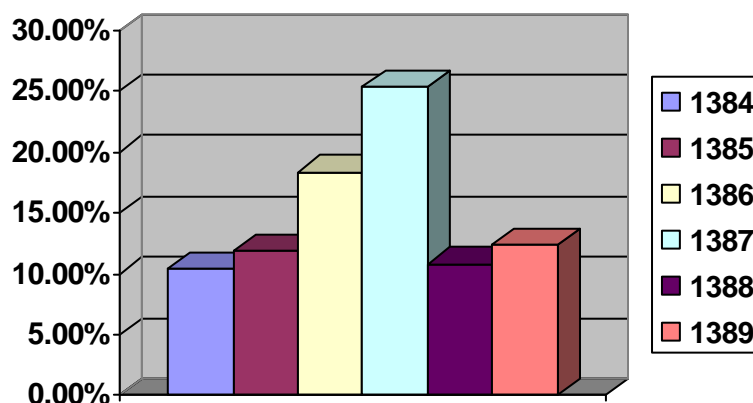
“Removing zeroes”: cartoonist Nikahang Kowsar suggests an alternative way to remove “zeroes” (President Ahmadinejad, Supreme Leader Khamenei, and Guardians Council chairman Jannati) to solve Iran’s problems (www.roozonline.com, April 4).

In response to the economy minister’s announcement on the government’s intent to remove three zeroes from the local currency, Mohammad Nahavandian, the chief of Iran’s Chamber of Commerce, has warned this week that the removal of zeroes cannot replace a real fight on inflation. Speaking to journalists, Nahavandian said that those who believe inflation can be successfully controlled by removing zeroes are mistaken. He noted that as long as there is no price stability, the removal of zeroes cannot meet the needs of the economy. He further stated that there is no direct link between currency value and economic strength, citing Japan as a country that enjoys strong economy despite having a weak currency compared to other currencies, like the dollar. According to Nahavandian, economic stabilization requires serious measures, and as long as Iran is afflicted with “chronic inflation”, there is need for real action rather than cosmetic changes such as removing zeroes (Donya-ye Eqtesad, April 5).

Meanwhile, the Central Bank has reported this week that in the previous Persian year (1389, ended on March 20, 2011), the inflation rose by 12.4 percent. This represents an increase in the inflation rate compared to 1388 (March 2009-March 2010), when it stood at 10.8 percent. The new increase in inflation reflects the price increase following the launch of the subsidy policy reform in the last months of 1389.

Inflation rates in Iran in recent years (Donya-ye Eqtesad, April 4, 2011)

Year	Inflation rate
1384 (March '05-March '06)	10.4%
1385 (March '06-March '07)	11.9%
1386 (March '07-March '08)	18.4%
1387 (March '08-March '09)	25.4%
1388 (March '09-March '10)	10.8%
1389 (March '10-March '11)	12.4%



In an editorial published this week, the economic daily Donya-ye Eqtesad claimed that due to the way the Central Bank calculates the inflation rate, the official inflation rate published does not reflect the actual price increase this past year, which reached 19.9 percent (Donya-ye Eqtesad, April 6).

Britain's Royal Society: Iran has world's fastest-growing number of scientific publications

A report published last week by the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge ranks Iran 1st in growth of scientific publications. Titled "Knowledge, Networks and Nations: Global Scientific Collaboration in the 21st Century", the report indicates that the number of scientific publications released in Iran between 1996-2008 increased by a factor of 18: from 736 in 1996 to 13,238 in 2008. The authors of the report attribute the significant increase in the number of scientific publications to the Iranian authorities' decision in August 2009 to implement a program to advance science, focusing on higher education and closer cooperation between local industry and academia. The program included a 2.5 million dollar investment in the establishment of a national center for nanotechnology research. Under the program, investments in research, development, and education will increase considerably until 2030: the investment in research and development will increase from 0.59 percent of the GDP in 2006 to 4 percent of the GDP in 2030, while the investment in education will increase from 5.49 percent of the GDP in 2007 to 7 percent in 2030.

The report also states that despite the political tension between the U.S. and Iran, there has been a considerable increase in publications co-authored by researchers from these two countries. The number of such co-authored publications increased from 388 to 1,831 (472 percent) between 1996 and 2008 (the full report is available on the Royal Society website at <http://royalsociety.org/policy/reports/knowledge-networks-nations/?f=1>). The Royal Society is Britain's science academy, and one of the world's oldest, most influential scientific associations.

A report published in July 2010 by the Yuval Ne'eman Science, Technology, and Security Workshop at Tel-Aviv University also indicates an unusual increase in the number of scientific publications released by Iranian researchers. According to the report, in 1985 Iran was responsible for 0.02 percent of the world's scientific publications, a figure which increased to 0.23 percent by 2002, meaning that the relative weight of Iranian science in the world increased by a factor of 11 in 17 years. The report argues, however, that the quality of Iran's scientific publications is still low. According to the author of the report, this situation has a lot to do with a deliberate government policy encouraging a large number of publications even at the expense of their quality, although there are some indications of change in the policy.¹

Pictures of the week: "Nature Day" (Sizdah Bedar, the last day of Norooz) in Tehran's parks (April 2)



¹ Moshe Vered, **Science and Technology in Iran** (Tel-Aviv University, Yuval Ne'eman Science, Technology, and Security Workshop, July 2010). The complete report (in Hebrew) is available at <http://sectech.tau.ac.il/.upload/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A1%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%9D/%20%D7%98%D7%9B%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%92%D7%99%D7%94%20%D7%91%D7%90%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9F%20%D7%93%D7%A8%20%D7%9E%D7%A9%D7%94%20%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%93.pdf>