

The High Cost of Proliferation

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Abstract

By the middle of Ahmadinejad's second term, the Principalist doctrine of nuclear sovereign was in tatters. Despite the fact that Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei took a publically defiant stand against the sanctions, signs of trouble multiplied. At the macro-economic level, Iran, a classic oil rentier state, was severely hit by the sanctions. Two features of the political system aggravated matters: (1) as a negotiated political order, the regime was made up of multiple power centers operating at the state and parastatal level; (2) as a neopatrimonial state, the regime drew legitimacy from payoff to select segments of the population.

Economic hardship had increasingly translated into anomie, defined as social behavior which undermined virtually every norm of the collective belief system, including dramatically increased crime rates, drug abuse, divorce, and sexually transmitted disease. As a rule, anomie precedes a crisis of legitimacy that threatens the very existence of the regime. How to respond to a potential loss of power had deepened the divisions within the elite. While the nuclear Principalists were steadfast in their defiance, the so-called Normalizers urged a nuclear deal with the international community in exchange for sanction relief and normalizing the country by reintegrating it into the community of nations. Though normally sympathetic to the Principalists, the Supreme Leader, fearful of the future of the regime, decided to accept the Normalizers argument that cost of the nuclear program was too high.

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