

## The Scouting Report: Iran's Presidential Election

In what has become a referendum on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's leadership, Iranians head to the polls on June 12 for the Iranian presidential election.

As the elections approach, President Obama says that he is prepared to work with Iran, but that the nation must not pursue nuclear weapons. The outcome will have major implications for U.S.-Iran relations.

To examine the outlook for and implications of Iran's elections, Brookings expert Suzanne Maloney and Senior *Politico* Editor Fred Barbash took questions in the June 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the Scouting Report.

The transcript of this web chat follows.

**Fred Barbash-Moderator:** Welcome all. Our guest today is Suzanne Maloney, who will take questions about the upcoming Iranian election.

Suzanne is a Senior Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, where her research focuses on energy, economic reform and U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Most recently, she was a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, covering Iran, Iraq, the Gulf States and broader Middle East issues. Prior to joining the government, she was the Middle East Advisor at ExxonMobil Corporation, where she worked on regional business development, political risk analysis, and corporate outreach and communications. Dr. Maloney directed the 2004 Council on Foreign Relations Task Force on US Policy toward Iran, chaired by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert Gates, and is the author of a forthcoming book on Iran for the U.S. Institute of Peace. She was the recipient of an International Affairs Fellowship at the Council on Foreign Relations and has previously served at Brookings as an Olin Fellow and a Brookings Research Fellow. She holds a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Welcome Suzanne. Let me start off by asking you just to bring us up to date on developments in the election campaign. The status of the "horse race," if you will.

**12:31 Suzanne Maloney:** The candidates are the current president, the notorious Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; a former prime minister of Iran, Mir Husayn Musavi who is one of the leading reformists; a former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karrubi, who believes the 2005 election was stolen from him; and the former head of the revolutionary guards and only other conservative in the race, Mohsen Rezai.

Over the past few days, election fever has hit Iran, thanks in part to a series of unprecedented and contentious televised debates between the candidates and an escalating series of public demonstrations.

**12:32 Suzanne Maloney:** One more point to start - anyone who tries to predict the outcome of an Iranian election in advance almost invariably finds him or herself on the wrong side of history - this is a very unpredictable country.

**12:32 [Comment From Travis Rumans]** How much do the election results actually matter? With Khomeini and the Council of Guardians still retaining power no matter who wins or loses, is this just political theater?

**12:33 Suzanne Maloney:** The best answer to this question is simply to compare the environment inside Iran and its relationship with the world under President Khatami (97-2005) and the shift that occurred after Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005.

The presidency has limited powers but can shape the context for all of Iran's policies to an inordinate degree.

**12:33 [Comment From shawn]** What kind of voter turnout can we expect?

**12:34 Suzanne Maloney:** Voter turnout generally hovers around 2/3 of the electorate - but has gone as high as 80 percent in the 1997 surprise upset by Khatami. The key factor will be urban turnout, as Ahmadinejad's opponents probably have a greater base there - historically the cities have had lower turnout particularly after the demise of the reform movement. If that trend changes, it won't favor the incumbent.

**12:35 [Comment From Peter Wütherich]** In what way will the outcome of the Iranian election influence the confrontation about Iran's nuclear ambitions? Which candidate would be best suited to find a peaceful solution for this contentious issue?

**12:36 Suzanne Maloney:** All of Ahmadinejad's opponents have indicated greater openness toward negotiations on the nuclear issue - although none have suggested that they would be willing to accept the UN's demand that Iran suspend uranium enrichment. And any of the rivals would certainly build momentum in the US for President Obama's announced strategy of engagement.

**12:36 [Comment From Cory]** Why is Mohsen Rezai in this race? Isn't it very conceivable that he could split the conservative vote?

**12:37 Suzanne Maloney:** I suspect Rezai entered the race to lay down a marker for his own political future. He is very ambitious and knows he has no chance of winning - but a decent showing could help him take a larger role among the conservatives for the future.

**12:37 [Comment From Travis Rumans]** What motivated Mousavi to jump into the election, after initially staying out?

**12:39 Suzanne Maloney:** Moussavi retired from politics 20 years ago and repeatedly resisted efforts by the then-fledgling reform movement to become its standard bearer in 1997 and onward. His reemergence is fascinating and not fully understood. He has a long history of friction with

Khamenei, the supreme leader, and some suggest that he was actively discouraged from resuming a political role in the past. But his performance this time around suggests that he's in it to win it.

**12:39 [Comment From Adrianna]** Are Iran's elections truly democratic and legitimate?

**12:40 Suzanne Maloney:** Not at all. An unelected council of clerics and lay jurists must approve all candidates, who have to swear fidelity to Iran's Islamic system. So it's not a fair fight by any standard. Still, they are intensely competitive and draw genuine, substantial participation by the Iranian population, so no one should write off the elections or their outcome because of the flaws in the process.

**12:40 [Comment From Cory]** Do you believe there is a high likelihood of tampering with the election results? As reported by the New York Times yesterday, there are rumblings in the Musavi campaign, and I quote, that a "senior cleric" has already authorized fixing the election outright for Ahmadinejad. Is this just an attempt on the part of that campaign to play the victim or do you see this as a real threat?

**12:42 Suzanne Maloney:** Rigging is not only possible, it is inevitable -- but within limits. There are varying estimates on what proportion of the vote can be manipulated. But Iranians do take part in these events in very considerable numbers, and an outcome that is totally at odds with their experience on the ground would be rejected by the public - a reality which the regime understands all too well.

**12:42 [Comment From Jenna]** Who does Khamenei support in these elections?

**12:43 Suzanne Maloney:** The supreme leader has been clear in his support for Ahmadinejad throughout the past four years, and none of the 3 rivals are individuals who Khamenei is terribly sympathetic toward. So presumably his preferences remain with Ahmadinejad, as all recent signs show - but Khamenei will take care not to tie himself too greatly to any single individual. For him, what matters is the maintenance of the system, and he wants to minimize the blow to his credibility if his candidate loses.

**12:44 [Comment From Fred (reston va)]** Suzanne, do you think some members of America's conservative political wing are hoping for an Ahmadinejad victory, just to keep the fires of anti-Iranian sentiment burning more brightly? On the other hand, if Mousavi wins, do you foresee a change in the political conversation in the United States?

**12:46 Suzanne Maloney:** I think there will be a sense of frustration among many quarters outside Iran if Ahmadinejad loses, because the current president has been such a gift to energizing diplomacy on Iran's nuclear issue. At the same time, I would be careful not to drive up expectations for change under any of his rivals, such as Moussavi - his posture on the nuclear issue will largely remain the same, and his victory could revive the power struggle and actually prove an obstacle to US-Iran diplomacy.

**12:46 [Comment From Peter Wütherich]** Do you see any chances for a rapprochement between Teheran und the Obama administration if Ahmadinejad is elected for a second term in office?

**12:47 Suzanne Maloney:** This question is related to the previous one - yes, I do think negotiations are possible (and likely at that!) even if Ahmadinejad hangs on. The most important development in Iran in recent years has been the Supreme Leader's public endorsement of talks with the US, and

as a result even radicals like Ahmadinejad have suggested they would be willing to engage directly with the US.

**12:47 [Comment From AK]** Do you think Lebanon's election this past Sunday will have any influence on the Iranian elections -- has the relative "defeat" of Hizballah there intensified support of Ahmadinejad among conservatives in Iran?

**12:48 Suzanne Maloney:** No influence whatsoever, except in the minds of external observers. Iranians vote in the same fashion that most Americans vote - on bread-and-butter issues that affect their day to day lives. Equally importantly, Lebanon and Iran have 2 very complex but very different political systems.

**12:48 [Comment From Guest]** All the candidates seem to have a similar stance on the nuclear issue, but what are their views on Iran's support for terrorist cells in Iraq and support for groups like Hizballah and Hamas?

**12:50 Suzanne Maloney:** There is a certain degree of consensus among all members of the Iranian political elite about Iran's relationships with longstanding client groups like Hezbollah and even about the utility of extending the country's influence by asserting itself in Iraq and developing new relationship with HAMAS.

BUT - and this is an important distinction - the tenor and tone of those relationships may differ under one of Ahmadinejad's rivals, and the willingness to contemplate compromise positions would probably be much greater. The example would be Khatami's rhetoric on the peace process while in office - he said that Iran would accept any outcome that was acceptable to the Palestinians.

**12:51 [Comment From Travis Rumans]** What impact does Khatami's withdrawal have on the election? Would he have been more likely to win then Mousavi?

**12:51 [Comment From Jenna]** Why did Khatami put his support behind Mousavi when it seems that Karrubi is closer to the reformist movement and Khatami's views?

**12:53 Suzanne Maloney:** I'll try to take these two questions together - the role of Khatami in this election is very important. He toyed with running himself and then pulled out in favor of Musavi - not sure how that decision was made, but if anything I'd suspect it had something to do with the fact that Musavi had more appetite for the fight personally than Khatami did. That said, Khatami has lent his considerable popular appeal and moral authority to Mussavi's candidacy, in part to help Mussavi overcome his name recognition deficit among the youth.

Karrubi has garnered a lot of former reformist activists in his campaign organization, but most consider his prospects to be lesser than those of Mussavi - for this reason I'd say Khatami made the pragmatic choice.

**12:53 [Comment From Dave]** What are the key issues/topics in the election? what do Iranians care about these days?

**12:55 Suzanne Maloney:** The key issue is the economy - Iranians are facing escalating inflation and unemployment, largely caused by Ahmadinejad's truly disastrous economic policies. Beyond this, though, the debates in the election and the anecdotal evidence suggests that a lot of Iranians

care about foreign policy - more importantly, Iran's place in the world and the very negative impact that Ahmadinejad has had on that.

**12:55 [Comment From Dave]** Who do you think is going to win?

**12:57 Suzanne Maloney:** This is the million dollar question. As I said to start, Iranian elections are unpredictable and too often external observers have gotten Iranian political developments spectacularly wrong. So I won't predict, but I will handicap -- Ahmadinejad was reasonably well-placed to get a second term: he is the incumbent and benefits from a lot of advantages including the support of the supreme leader. He has more political savvy than we give him credit for, and has successfully appealed to Iranian nationalism. And he has doled out lots of money around the country over the past 4 years.

So the election was his to lose. And he may have done so. The debates seem to have galvanized the opposition. If the election goes to a second round- meaning no candidate wins a plurality - Ahmadinejad is in deep trouble. He would have more trouble than Moussavi in expanding his base.

**12:57 [Comment From Cory]** Does the focus on the economy, especially in regards to inflation and unemployment, lead any segment of the Iranian population to believe that the large scale support the government gives to proxy groups would be better utilized helping the Iranian people themselves?

**12:59 Suzanne Maloney:** You'll find quotes like this in some of the Western reporting on the elections. The reality is that Iranians want economic growth, jobs, opportunities for education and interaction with the wider world - irrespective of the assistance to Hezbollah or HAMAS.

**12:59 [Comment From Guest]** Do you think that people may be overestimating the impact that this election will have on Iran's future? After all if you look at the 1997 elections, there seemed to be a similar amount of zeal and optimism for Khatami, but little actually changed.

**1:01 Suzanne Maloney:** I disagree profoundly. 1997 didn't change the Iranian system but it had an enormous impact on Iran -- the political culture opened up, thousands of books and newspapers were published, and a lot of important economic reforms were undertaken by the Khatami administration. Conversely you can see how much impact Ahmadinejad has had albeit in more negative terms - increased repression at home, increased troublemaking in the region. Don't buy the line that these elections don't matter.

**1:01 [Comment From James]** Could you please expand on how the televised debates have affected the particular candidates chances?

**1:03 Suzanne Maloney:** I'm not there, so I'm projecting to some extent but based on my viewing of the debates and the reaction that I'm reading in the press and on the web, these have been very very important political moments for Iran. They were spell-binding and certainly galvanized a lot of opinion in all directions. Ahmadinejad gave as good as he got - but I'd guess he was the big loser from these debates because his tendencies for prevarication and fear-mongering were on full display.

**1:03 [Comment From Paola]** are attack ads a problem in Iranian elections? And can women vote?

**1:05 Suzanne Maloney:** Iranian campaigns differ in some ways from American campaigns, but there is as much if not more dirty pool than over here.

Yes women vote - all Iranian ages 18 and above are permitted to vote (although in past years the age has been lower, it will be interesting to see how that impacts turnout.)

**1:05 [Comment From fred]** How much will Ahmadinejad's incumbency play a role in the election?

**1:06 Suzanne Maloney:** Incumbency counts - the reality is that no sitting Iranian president has ever lost a race for a second term. If it happens on Friday (or in a runoff next week) it would be unprecedented.

**1:06 [Comment From Eric]** Is Ahmadinejad popular in Iran?

**1:08 Suzanne Maloney:** He definitely has a core constituency - orthodox supporter of the revolution and the Islamic system; the lower class Iranians who resent how many of the powerful figures have benefitted from their access to power over the past 30 years; members of the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij mobilization corps who believe that the best defense for Iran is a strong offense.

But even some among these constituencies may have been alienated by his economic policies and his messianic rhetoric over the past 4 years.

**1:08 [Comment From daniel]** just how powerful is the Iranian president anyway?

**1:10 Suzanne Maloney:** The presidency is a deliberately limited office - like the French revolutionaries, Iran's post-revolutionary state builders wanted to avoid the establishment of a powerful executive branch. The president controls the purse strings, with an important assist from the parliament that must approve the budget, and he sits on the National Security Council and other key decision-making bodies. But more importantly I think Ahmadinejad has showed that a president who is determined to make his influence felt across the board, on all issues affecting Iran, will find a way to do so, for better or for worse.

**1:10 [Comment From Guest]** If Mousavi were to win, what role do you think his wife would take on? Is there a chance she would be put in a ministerial position?

**1:12 Suzanne Maloney:** The role of Moussavi's wife is a fascinating one, even before Ahmadinejad had the amazing nerve to hold up an intelligence file on her during the televised debate last week and accuse her of having gotten her academic positions through connections rather than credentials. Like many Iranian women, Zahra Rahnavard is a force to be reckoned with and she appears to be helping her husband's prospects (she is perhaps more charismatic than he is.) Who knows what role she'd take, but she could well be a more prominent first lady than Iran has previously experienced.

**1:13 [Comment From Tom]** There seems to be a "youth bulge" in the Muslim world. Is that true in Iran? And if so will young voters influence the outcome?

**1:15 Suzanne Maloney:** Roughly two-thirds of the Iranian population is under the age of thirty and I believe this cohort constitutes half the electorate. This is a very powerful constituency in Iran. While there are obviously diverse views among them, young Iranians nearly universally express an

interest in greater opportunities for education and employment. They are sophisticated, surprisingly informed about and interconnected with the wider world but feel their horizons are constrained by the lousy economy and the continuing frictions between their government and the rest of the world. If they turn out in large numbers - as they did in 1997 when the voting age was actually lower - they can have a decisive impact on the election.

**1:15 [Comment From maria]** Obviously there are different groups of people with different beliefs in Iran. But, on the whole, would you say that Iranians are leaning towards modernization or traditionalism? How will these feelings be reflected in the election?

**1:17 Suzanne Maloney:** No one should be mistaken about this - Iran is in no way a "backward" country. It is a modern sophisticated society that is rightfully proud of its history and legacy of a great civilization. There are as you say a wide variety of opinions, but most of the population believes that Iran must change to keep pace with globalization and technology. The question is what kind of change, and within what parameters. Frankly, none of the candidates in this election support changing the Islamic system outright - if they espoused those views, they wouldn't be allowed to run.

**1:17 [Comment From Chico]** Should we consider these elections fair? What sort of monitoring will be in place?

**1:19 Suzanne Maloney:** Iran does not permit external election monitoring. The Interior Ministry - which is part of the Ahmadinejad cabinet - and the Guardians' Council (an unelected body of clerics and lay jurists) oversee the elections. But the reformist have in the past mounted serious efforts to closely watch and report on the elections procedures, and vocally protested when there appear to be massive irregularities. That's a small measure of accountability, not sufficient but not irrelevant either.

**1:19 [Comment From Andre]** What kind of role does the media have in the election?

**1:21 Suzanne Maloney:** Iran's newspapers and more recently news agencies and news-oriented web sites have often served as proxies for political parties. The party system in Iran is relatively weak, and so when a political figure or group wants to influence the political debate, the first thing that they do is to open a newspaper or website. So there are dozens of them actively cheering for a particular candidate or faction.

**1:21 [Comment From Sally]** What will the election results be on the Middle East peace process?

**1:24 Suzanne Maloney:** The influence is indirect, but not unimportant. A second Ahmadinejad term would maintain the current high levels of tension in the region, which would be unfortunate but also could galvanize some Israelis and some Arab states to push for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement. More propitious would be the victory of someone like Moussavi; he is a longtime supporter Hezbollah etc, but has clearly indicated that he wants to rehabilitate Iran's image, which could entail a reversion to the Khatami position on the peace process. That may not sound like much, but it's probably the best we can hope for.

**1:24 [Comment From Josh]** Who should the U.S. hopes wins from a national security standpoint?

**1:27 Suzanne Maloney:** Ahmadinejad has not been good for Iran - not for its people, its freedoms or its economy - nor has he been good for US interests in the region. But ultimately this is a choice

for the Iranian people, and any effort by Washington to try to influence that outcome would backfire in a big way. We have to deal Iran as it is, not as we wish it to be, and even if he is not re-elected Ahmadinejad will continue to have an influence on Iranian politics, since the views that he represented are shared by other power brokers. I'll keep my fingers crossed that the outcome is one that facilitates a serious negotiating process between Washington and Tehran. Thanks for participating in this chat!

**1:28 Fred Barbash-Moderator:** Thanks Suzanne and thanks to all of our readers. We'll be back next week, same time same place.

**1:29 Suzanne Maloney:** Thanks and I'll be watching for election results over the weekend along with many of you.