

## Nuclear Dispute Arouses Patriotism Among Iranians

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ISFAHAN, [Iran](#), Feb. 4 — Iran's nuclear program will not help Ali Shafiei pay his bills, or Muhammad Soheili Pour sell appliances or Yussefi Janali sell rugs, but they all said that they support Iran's right to nuclear energy and do not much care how other nations of the world react.

News that the International Atomic Energy Agency had voted by an overwhelming margin to refer Iran to the United Nation's Security Council was very slow to get out in Iran, where people have for the most part focused their concerns on domestic economic conditions and their own day-to-day challenges.

But in interviews in this ancient central Iranian city, and in the hills of northern Tehran, people expressed similar ideas — trepidation over what awaits them, especially the prospect of penalties, but an almost universal commitment to support their government's drive for nuclear energy.

"I do not know what will happen now, but we are worried if sanctions are imposed," said Arash Shahroussian, 26, a government employee in Tehran. "My father is a transit driver and he might not be able to work anymore."

The nuclear case has become a matter of national pride, but it also has tapped into broader sense of victimization and a glorification of martyrdom that many people here describe as a part of their national and religious identities.

Muhammad Jaavad Molkoti was seated behind a cash register in a small appliance store here when he compared this struggle, against the west, to a struggle faced by the Prophet Muhammad in the early days of his prophecy. In the story that Mr. Molkoti offered, the prophet and a small band of his followers were surrounded by enemies in the desert with little to eat, and still they stood strong.

"Eight people would have to share one single date, and still they resisted," Mr. Molkoti said. "They did not give in, and we are inspired by them."

The men standing around nodded in agreement, and even shrugged off the prospect, no matter how distant, of international penalties and isolation. "It's not going to be any worse than wartime for us, and we had eight years of that," Muhammad Soheili-Pour said.

"Whether they refer us or not, we are ready for anything," said Rasoul Soheili, standing nearby.

Of course, it is possible Iranians choose to show a face of solidarity and defiance because that is the position their government has asked them to take. But the feelings expressed are often raw, angry and consistent across social, economic and geographic lines. If there is a divide, it seems that those with more to lose economically tend to be a bit more anxious about a showdown.

"The first thing any one thinks of is his own job," said Behzad Moussavi, who works as a driver for a private company. "I heard the news on the radio today, and I told myself I would not be able to work anymore if there are sanctions."

But for those on the lower end of the economic ladder — the vast majority of the population — the prospect of penalties poses little more than a distant threat.

"Even if they did impose sanctions, what difference will it make?" asked Ali Shafiei, who sold nuts inside the old bazaar. "I don't care. It won't make it any worse than today."

Just outside the catacomblike corridors of the bazaar, Javad Reekhtehgaran stood chatting with a friend who was selling small rugs off a cart. Neither had heard the news about the referral, but when informed, both grew angry.

"We have all signed off on our will to say we want atomic energy." Mr. Reekhtehgaran said. "Everybody agrees."

"They should stop everybody," shouted Yussefi Janali, a wool hat pulled tight over his head. "Does France have permission to have it? Does Israel have a permit? How about Pakistan? Who do these countries talk to get authorization? America should disarm itself."

The conversation grew more heated, and hands were flying. Mr. Janali leaned over his cart to make his point. "Even if they want to put pressure on Iran, Iranians will never give up their rights."

But there is at least one person who has expressed anxiety over his country appearing before the Security Council: former President Muhammad Khatami. In comments reported Friday by the Iranian Student News Agency, the former president was quoted as saying that confrontation threatened to hurt Iran's chances and developing a nuclear program as well as the economy.

He called on the government to return to the strategy that had been pursued by his government, which hoped to convince the West that Iran was only looking to develop an energy program, not build weapons. The present administration has been far more aggressive, taking unilateral action to restart its nuclear program.

"It is necessary to act wisely and with tolerance so that our right to nuclear energy will not be abolished," Mr. Khatami said. "We cannot defend anything if we do not have a developed country, not our country and sovereignty but not even our religion."

*Nazila Fathi contributed reporting from Tehran for this article.*

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