I finally arrived in Tehran, after having had to negotiate 22 hours for my visa – this despite having been promised one by Tehran in order to deliver the opening lecture for a Dutch Afghanistan exposition at the Austrian Cultural Forum. I finally received the visa in Vienna due to the interventions of Michael Postl, Austria’s ambassador to Iran. This happened to be the very weekend when the international community would learn about a second, hitherto unannounced Iranian enrichment site, and days before the first meeting between Iran and the P5+1.

My first impression of Tehran was great surprise! It was my first time in Iran. After passing by a wonderful Mosque in honor of Grand Ayatollah Khomeini on a beautifully lit highway from the Imam Khomeini Airport, I arrived in a city that displayed great (old) wealth – beautiful avenues, enormous numbers of new cars, considerable traffic, and since we arrived in the early morning hours, cleaning personnel were everywhere. In some parts of the city, especially in the north of Tehran, rents are apparently comparably higher than in Paris – and well dressed, beautiful young people, many women, abound. I understand that there are no slums, and there is no loitering in this part of the city. North Tehran, where I stayed, is located about 1,500 meters above sea level and has an excellent climate and good air quality, clean well water, and is surrounded to the North with mountains up to 3,900 meters high. The greater area of Tehran has almost 15 million inhabitants, the city proper with about 9 million. I was told in advance of the trip that the infrastructure would generally need major investments but I personally saw significant building activity. But it is apparent that money is lacking because in many cases construction has stopped. Tehran is the center of the country – whatever must happen, happens here.

Apparently, there were enormous activities on the streets prior to the elections June 12. This changed dramatically afterwards, and there has been utter shock ever since. The security forces quashed the demonstrations by extremely effective means – the security forces simply enclosed and wrapped up specific areas, and “took care” of whomever happened to be in this area for whatever reason, whether they were there to demonstrate or simply there by coincidence. Some say that there was Russian special training of Iranian security forces to provide for this effective operation.

The quashing of the post-election demonstrations and the apparent “descending by Imam Khamenei down into politics from the height and aloofness of his position” has affected the belief of many of the people in the Islamic Republic. For some, there is less readiness to believe in religion today – a much different situation than during the Iran-Iraq war and before. People told me that the theocracy could well be on its way out. I also heard it said that one “loves Obama.”
Iran’s great war with Iraq has truly shaped this nation, with close to a million dead on the Iranian side and scores more injured. I understand that the war with Iran was one of the most unifying events for national solidarity and Iranian nationalism. Arguably, it solidified the Iranian Revolution. This and the various crackdowns by secret police since then, however, means that that basically each family has “a casualty” which makes suffering omnipresent. During my brief period in Tehran, I met several people who had lost a brother or relative in the war, and one person whose close friend at 16 years of age was suddenly taken away from the school class only to be hanged a week later. Middle aged people are individually and collectively traumatized by all that, and now by the crackdowns of June and July with the 100s of secret executions and the 1,000s in prison. Hence, some argue that Iran is today close to a police state. This is painful for them, as the Iranians are proud and believe in a high level of ethics, values, culture, and tradition, and see themselves as a highly sophisticated, literate, and cultivated nation. Draconian police and secret service control, in addition to the reported brutality of security forces, does not match that self-image. It so happens that the Monday I visited, Tehran’s universities started. We still heard demonstrations with shouts of “Moussavi.” More than 70% of the 75 million total population of Iran is under 30 years old. Since the revolution, there has been official encouragement to have many children and children and their future are at the center of family attention; but the bloody Iran-Iraq war created a huge demographic shift with economic consequences. Those males who survived represent today part of the members of the elite while nearly 40% of those below the age of 30 are unemployed. There is significant inflation with prices increasing by 5% each month. All purchases are done in cash or, as I have heard, some even in barter, no credit cards can be used.

For many it is rather difficult to have ends meet in Tehran and other urban areas. Most people have to work multiple jobs as people typically have to pay one-third or more of their incomes for the rent of their apartments. Many have a regular job from 7am to 3 pm, and then a second one after that. A university professor, for example, might try to supplement his salary as a taxi driver at night. It seems that the difference between those who live easier lives and those who don’t increases each day. So a new, increasing social divide enters the society. Those friendly with the regime or working for it benefit increasingly. A new social dimension may hence enter into the society as this reality is combined with an element of fatalism. Suicide rates are increasing dramatically. While here is great brainpower, determination, and pride in the country and even though the young ones display beauty and energy, a significant brain drain has developed. An estimated 150,000 educated Iranians leave the country every year. Moreover, I was told that among the Iranian youth there is also a great drug problem with up to 1 in 5 taking narcotics. It is said that Iran has a major heroin problem with some 3 million drug users.

Factories have closed since they either have no spare parts or have over-aged machinery. While I did see rather modern computer equipment in governmental offices, there is very limited direct foreign investment – especially in energy and other vital sectors. Chinese consumer products are available in three types of quality – including the high “European” quality available at very high prices, the “average” quality and mid-range price, and the very cheap quality.

But there are also increasingly structural problems. For example, in the Iranian car plant, where only 1,400 are sold out of 5,000 produced there is no adaptation in the models like the Paykan. So the lack of imports of spares and technology causes increasing effects on industry and economics. On the other hand, I was informed that Etemad-e-Mobin Development Comp. an
affiliate of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, bought more than a 50 percent stake in Iran's Telecommunications Company. The government had been looking to privatize the firm. The acquisition effectively places the vital telecommunications sector under the control of the Guards and this clearly has political ramifications.

Special industries like aerospace do suffer relatively more than other branches of industry. Each military air maneuver has serious accidents involving flight equipment and causing casualties due to material fatigue or lack of spares. However, all said, I feel this society and its leadership could withstand a lot of international sanctions. There is a grey market economy that people utilize to make ends meet. Targeted, specific sanctions against the elites and travel restrictions on some might be perhaps more effective.

Iran is also shaped by its perception of itself as a great nation and civilization within its region. Here, I understand, Iranians feel superior to its neighbors. Iran seems to have a special relationship with its northwestern neighbor, Turkey. Iranians now see Turkey as a primary vacation destination and much Iranian wealth travels to Turkey. More than a million Iranians are apparently in Turkey, and Iranians do not need a visa to go there.

Conversely, Iran faces significant challenges from its eastern neighbor, Afghanistan. Most of the narcotics sold and used in Iran are smuggled in from Afghanistan. There are also more than two million Afghan refugees in Iran, many of whom work there as laborers. There are many areas of common interest between Iran and the international community in dealing with Afghanistan – the Iranians also consider the Taliban an enemy, they lost many diplomats in Taliban controlled Afghanistan prior to 2001, they take continued casualties amongst the guards on the long Iran-Afghanistan border, and there are efforts to create extensive border barriers in order to try to curb smuggling and the drug trade. In my opening address at the exposition in Tehran I emphasized these possibly congruent areas suggestion cooperation.

My general impression is that President Ahmadinejad has created a powerful and controlling regime. It has great intelligence, control, can be highly manipulative, and certainly does not shy away from intimidating the population. It controls the media, communications, and information flows as such. It can be ruthless against its adversaries. This is taken even to entering a diplomatic residence and intimidating diplomats. Everyone feels observed and forced to look over ones shoulder. But it also seems that the regime itself is divided, perhaps even feeling embattled. Apparently, too, the leadership is divided. Clearly popular resistance to a certain politics is not over. So while there is real national pride in all quarters – and the regime may well play on it – there remains a rather large percentage that supports this regime. Still, the regime might operate in a defensive manner, some argue it is even split and certain members feel embattled.

I am certain that the leadership will do whatever it takes to preserve the Iranian national independence, pride, and foster Iranian achievements – including nuclear capability. Clearly, driving through Tehran, shows that this is not the average capital of a developing country. This was an imperial capital with parallels to Paris and Vienna. I see this as a telling sign for the nuclear negotiations. For the regime, it will always be possible to mobilize the Persian pride of a great national heritage, culture, and civilization. The regime may even draw advantages from pressure from abroad as this could help unify the nation behind an otherwise embattled government. The Iran-Iraq war experience, the various sufferings since 1979, and the still living
memory of the 1954 coup, have hardened both regime and population, making it easier for them to withstand sanctions and pressure. There is a great dose of nationalism mixed with defeatism – we have seen the ups and downs of the nation, we have lost loved ones, we have lived through the revolution, the war and suppression, we shall pass these challenges today and the difficulties ahead. We are proud Iranians, and we want to succeed in life.

Under the worst circumstances, I could see a comparison between the negotiation strategies of President Ahmadinejad and former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. Milosevic was severely embattled domestically post-Dayton in 1995 and faced a real crisis in 1997. As a result, he instigated the Kosovo problem, in order to unify the population against an enemy and the outside world. Alas, the game turned out to become a politically deadly “Russian roulette” for him. I am not certain how far President Ahmadinejad would be willing to go to manipulate a possibly antagonistic course vis-à-vis the outside, but I could well imagine that he could try to use tensions with the outside world to unify the domestic situation. The more he feels challenged domestically, the higher the chance that he might try to somehow ratchet up international tensions. A major crisis with the outside world would certainly permit the regime to “take care” of domestic opposition and rally nationalism. At this point I am convinced that we should prepare for a nuclear capable Iran.

On the other hand, I am convinced that there are many who are tired of sanctions and of not being able to travel, and would like to lead and enjoy a regular, prosperous, and secure life. We were treated very nicely at the airport prior to our departure – certainly due to the high standing with the authorities of Ambassador Postl – and received even the gift of freedom for a common friend.

I left very impressed by a country in the heritage of the great Persian tradition, culture, and resources, a turbulent history, great suffering, and enormous capabilities and prospects.