

Iran's Future Scenarios: An Illustrative Discussion of Multiple Mental Models

Vahid V. Motlagh
Independent Futurist
Iran

Abstract

Recent political developments in Iran, in particular the disputed presidential election which resulted in keeping Mr. Ahmadinejad seated in the office for the second term and the subsequent street and cyber events that were encouraged and orchestrated by the opposition leaders, drew global attention. This essay provides from an insider vantage point some alternative futures about the political outcomes of the disputed election by adopting a novel approach and applying the essence of scenario planning method, that is explicitly and directly switching among diverse mental models. In this essay after contextualizing the election problem six different mental models are explicitly adopted and accordingly six scenarios are created and briefly illustrated.

Keywords: Iran, election, opposition, Mr. Ahmadinejad, Mr. Mousavi, alternative futures, scenarios, mental models

Introduction

This essay seeks to present from an insider's vantage point some informed and creative speculations about the post election events in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is worthwhile particularly after the world has been watching news of violent unrest and tumult in Iran during the past months. People across the globe have been informed through YouTube clips and Twitter posts about the crackdown of street protests by anti-riot police and government loyal militia.

Pundits, both Iranian and foreign, have already shared their insights into this political crisis, but most of them are fixed on what just occurred or is occurring right now and are ignoring the medium and long term implications and consequences of the current disputes. One reason could be that only a few are well equipped with the art and science of futures studies when figuring out conjectures or offering analyses about alternative futures.

Use of Multiple Mental Models

Both the value of scenario planning and its strong link with challenging our mental models have been extensively discussed in the literature. Scenario planning is "the stock-in-trade of futures studies" and there are some useful, yet incomplete, catalogues and categories of the techniques currently available and used (Bishop, Hines, & Collins, 2007). Bood and Postma (1997) theoretically discussed in detail "the strategic learning with scenarios". Central to their discussion was the "mental models managers carry with them in their heads and which guide their perception and interpretation. "Also, Chermak (2003) reviewed and highlighted the significant role of scenarios and particularly the value added of "revealing, analyzing, sharing, and reconstructing the mental models" when transferring the tacit knowledge of experts within and across the organizations.

We, futurists, have a gradually accumulated and rich knowledge base of different methods and techniques to start a scenario planning exercise, the results of which can be eye opening. As noted a crucial part of any such exercises is to make explicit the mental models we implicitly and unconsciously adopt to make sense of the environment. If we constantly and deeply switch our mental models from the most familiar to the most unfamiliar and perhaps less relevant then a set of insights and scenarios can be produced.

Here I use multiple mental models to individually create and illustrate various scenarios concerning the futures of Iran. The aim is not only to provide strategic intelligence for Iran-watchers but also, as Schoemaker (1993) empirically demonstrated, the scenarios presented herein may significantly, that is up to 50%, stretch their "subjective confidence ranges" about some quantitative variables that are used to measure some important issues in which the country play a key role as both a rising regional power and the fourth largest exporter of oil in the world.

Contextualizing the Iranian Election and Its Immediate Aftermath

I begin with a short review of the contemporary historical events surrounding the election to establish a general sense of what happened. Two days before the election I wrote a short post in my English weblog about what was going on among the top levels of the Iranian government. In it, I referred to the pre-election campaign and highlighted an "unprecedented face off and harsh language" between Mr. Ahmadinejad and his major challenger Mr. Mir Hossein Mousavi. In fact they argued with each other intensely in a live presidential debate and soon drifted to exchanging allegations, the essence of which made Iranian people, myself included, think of their rulers as a hypocritical band of either thieves or liars. President Ahmadinejad started with a rare vituperative tone, overtly challenging a coalition of evil consisting of former Presidents. He openly, and for the first time in the public arena and in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran, talked about Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami and Mir Hossein Mousavi's machinations to stop him from seeking another term in office.

The debate was so harsh that analysts felt it could stir unrest and even violent street clashes between their supporters before and after the election. However, hours after the live debate, Iran's Supreme Leader, who has the final say on all state matters, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, intervened and delivered a speech on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the death of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He rejected the remarks by the reformist candidate, Mr. Mousavi, who challenged the incumbent the previous night and claimed that the President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's foreign policy has "humiliated" Iranians across the globe. He also warned against any provocative debate and potential unrest on the streets.

That said, it was evident then that firstly, the turnout was going to be amazing and based on my own estimate, that it could be as high as 90% of eligible voters. Secondly, a strong signal was detected from within the incestuous circles of the Iranian regime indicating a deep fissure within the regime's top brass. President Ahmadinejad took his final time on air some hours before the poll, and insinuated that the two powerful and allegedly corrupt clerics Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mehdi Karroubi were comparable to two historical corrupt figures in Shia Islam, namely Talha ibn Ubayd-Allah and Zubair ibn al-Awam. Thirdly, if the incumbent Ahmadinejad were to be declared again as the President-elect the day after the poll, many observers would see a velvet revolution scenario as extremely probable because apparently the green-clad supporters of his major reformist challenger had already prepared for a major victory, shouting provoking slogans such as "if they cheat, Iran will explode in anger" or "if they don't cheat, Mousavi will win." Criticism against Mr. Ahmadinejad, supported mostly by working class and poor families, was rampant both on the streets and in cyberspace, was clear on Facebook, the popular social networking site among modern and young Iranians. Most of his dedicated opponents, however, were young men and women who were born and raised in some well-to-do families, who feared that allowing him to remain in office for the next four years would only result in keeping his iron fist on civil society and their personal-social freedoms, including pro-Western life styles.

Thus some continuation of verbal and even physical attacks after the election was expected. When the Ministry of Interior officially announced that the ballots were closed at 10 pm local time, all five channels of state television's daylong coverage of the event, in which people's high participation was repeatedly interpreted and praised as a solid legitimacy of the theocratic regime, suddenly ended. I was online checking the Islamic Republic News Agency website updates. At midnight it ran a headline announcing "a significant lead" for the incumbent and celebrated rather too early his victory, just two hours after the vote counting began across the country.

In the morning, the capital Tehran, was like a ghost town. There were no signs of cheerful crowds. Instead there was some hearsay about scattered clashes between the green movement, disbelieving protesters and the anti-riot police and plainclothes agents, who wearing helmets and wielding batons and shields, relentlessly beat protesters and tried to break up crowds of angry people. Very soon mobile phones, text messaging, the Internet and even some Persian satellite channels were all shut down, filtered, jammed, or difficult to access. It was obvious that the authorities were depriving the opposition of any available media. In days the situation became too volatile

and reminiscent of Iranian Student Protests of July, 1999, and maybe the 1979 Iranian Revolution itself. There were reports of massive arrests of mastermind reformists, well-known activists and able organizers. The challenger candidate vanished from the public scene and some rumors said that he had been put under home arrest by the Iranian intelligent agents. Mr. Mousavi's supporters started talking about a putsch taking place through Ahmadinejad's cheating and rigged election. Soon after, at a press conference, Mr. Ahmadinejad announced a planned celebration for his landslide victory, with a mass of his supporters at a major and crowded square in downtown Tehran.

The tumult gradually gained strength until the Supreme Leader himself intervened again. He insisted in a Friday prayer sermon which was broadcast on the state run television, that all protesting candidates should respect the law. He added that they had no way but to file and direct their complaint about alleged election frauds to the Guardian Council. This council in Iran's highly complex power structure assumes the same legal role as the Supreme Court in the US which resolved the 2000 presidential election in favor of George W. Bush. The Ayatollah, before trying the emotions of a weeping crowd, firmly warned the challenging candidates, notably Mr. Mousavi, that if they chose to defy the rule of law and continue to campaign in streets they would be responsible for any subsequent chaos and bloodshed, in the meantime he vowed to crush any illegal protests.

Nonetheless, the opposition leader Mr. Mousavi did not heed his remarks. Questioning the impartiality of the pro-Ahmadinejad Guardian Council he again requested the annulment of the preposterous fraudulent election. Following the guidelines of Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 2004), if we focus on the "genealogy of the disagreement problem between Mr. Mousavi and Ayatollah Khamenei", it is understood that the problem was not unprecedented and dated back to 1985, when the former was a prime minister and the latter was re-elected for a second term as the president. Although Ayatollah Khamenei was not in favor of Mr. Mousavi to become his prime minister again, he had to accept him, notably because of support by Ayatollah Khomeini, then the Supreme Leader, who had declared that he deemed it not expedient for the Islamic Republic to change the prime minister (Hashemi Rafsanjani, 2008, p.218). Later on in 1989, after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the prime minister post in the cabinet was constitutionally removed through some significant amendments. Mr. Mousavi subsequently chose a de facto twenty years absence from the political scene and until very recently kept a very low profile throughout this rather long period.

These developments were enough for Iran to witness one of its bloodiest days after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. On the following days people defied the Supreme Leader's warnings and went on to the streets again. I heard choppers flying in Tehran's sky and gun shots not too far from my neighborhood. This fraction of protesters dared to come on to the streets and became courageous enough to rise against the sacrosanct ruling cleric who is also the chief of all armed forces. They mounted a high noon challenge to the theocratic regime which is officially presented as a religious democracy. There were casualties and loss of lives on both sides. The most prominent victim was Ms. Neda Agha Soltan, who although was only a spectator, was soon turned into a symbol for the green movement right after her gruesome death was captured by

mobile phones and widely YouTubed across the globe, spurring emotion and sympathy.

The Guardian Council finally resolved the 2009 Iranian presidential election in favor of Mr. Ahmadinejad. But with Mr. Mousavi rejecting his victory as illegitimate, the fight is still simmering and alive although most of his top aides and grass-root supporters have been imprisoned and allegedly tortured, often psychologically. Perhaps this will continue until they yield to tough authorities and record public confessions admitting they were executing some velvet revolution against the clerical regime through direct engagement with the Western agents, particularly "the most wicked and treacherous" Britain, echoing Ayatollah Khamenei's sermon.

Multiple Mental Models and the Futures of Iran

Inside and outside observers are interested and concerned about the final outcome of current developments. They have to work with some tough sets of questions. For example, do these protests indicate another revolution in Iran? Will the mullahs disappear? Which parties or factions will prevail in the country's fierce politics? Is the country going to open up to modernist attitudes and abandon its traditional and anti-West sentiments which are constantly and officially propagated? Last but not least important are the crucial questions surrounding its nuclear program.

The streets are now quiet. Evidently a huge amount of information has been produced by both camps in a matter of weeks in the after election developments. However, without resisting the imposition of dominant mental models we cannot hope to make such sense of the complexities of the contemporary situation. Now, is the appropriate time to use multiple mental models to make better sense of what might happen next.

I explore briefly some of these scenarios below as a way of inviting discussion.

Scenario 1: Allah Knows and Is Behind the Ultimate Winner

To begin my exploration of different mental models and build some plausible scenarios I have to mention that Iran is a Muslim country with a Shia majority. That means the Iranian people are generally under the influence of some Islamic-Arabic mental models of which the Quran and its divine teachings is the most prominent. Believer scholars and the lay persons as well tend to take this sacred text literally so that they try to live upon and according to it. It is reasonable to see what a Quranic mental model could offer to this analysis because practicing Muslims tend to interpret every and each series of events through it. Obviously the value of such insights is not questionable among the Muslim societies including the Iranian society.

When it comes to the futures of peoples, nations, and civilizations most religious texts like the Quran, favor and talk about a prediction that is a single future, not multiple scenarios. However, the exact nature of this sole future remains unknown to the ordinary people, since it is known only to the omniscient, God or Allah. Sometimes but not always the future is revealed to his messengers and saints. Therefore convincing a Muslim about the role of foresight or scenario planning in some large scale

social developments can be a daunting and challenging task. But Muslims generally and Iranians in particular are at ease with using tools or techniques of futures studies for personal or corporate planning because as approved by Islamic teachings, it could be a diligent practice for managing our mundane affairs on Earth before resurrecting after death to live in the after-life.

In the Quran, for instance, there is a prediction, considered a miracle by Muslims, which says even if the Roman Empire is defeated by the Persian Empire in a land near the Arabian peninsula "they after this defeat of theirs will soon be victorious within a few years. With Allah is the decision in the past and in the future. On that day shall the believers rejoice. It is the promise of Allah. Never does Allah depart from His promise but most men understand not." (See Sura 30 Ayats 4 to 6)

So according to this faith-based, Islamic mental model which admits only a certain (single future) prediction, the final outcome of the post election crisis rests solely in the hands of Allah and is known only to Him. Specifically, Allah gives each people "a term appointed. When their term is reached not an hour can they cause delay nor an hour can they advance it." Such a theme is explicitly emphasized at least four times in Quran (See for instance Sura 7 Ayat 34, Sura 10 Ayat 49, Sura 15, Ayat 5 and Sura 23 Ayat 43). However, these Ayats have to be construed in the light of other Ayats as well. For example, according to Quran "verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change it themselves with their own souls. But when once Allah willeth a people's punishment, there can be no turning it back nor will they find besides Him any to protect." (See Sura 13 Ayat 11) This is totally in line with yet another set of Ayats that note "man can have nothing but what he strives for. The fruit of his striving will soon come in sight." (See Sura 53 Ayat 39).

Thus no matter which competing camps finally prevail, they may claim that Allah was on their side, knowing beforehand their victory and helping them to achieve it. Consider, for example, a scenario in which the opposition, whose supporters currently exhibit civil disobedience by shouting "Allah is Great" at night from the rooftops, will take power somehow in the future. In this case, the Iranian people would see the event as "a term appointed" by Allah for Mr. Ahmadinejad that occurred because they acted to "change their condition themselves with their own souls" and were thus reaping "the fruits of their striving." Of course the same could also be claimed by Mr. Ahmadinejad's camp. Consider a scenario in which he remains in place and successfully acts upon his promises to root out the corrupt class, delivering social justice for the less privileged Iranian citizens, and bringing to their knees some "arrogant world powers". Exactly the same applies, that is, "a term appointed" by Allah was realized and people "changed their condition themselves with their own souls". In other words, because people are under the influence of this mental model, both camps can equally exploit it to justify and encourage their campaign and acclaim their would-be desirable scenarios once realized. However, before the fact, nobody, particularly Iranian Muslims themselves, can ever know what that single future may be.

Scenario 2: Weapons Prevail Logic Fails

If we switch to a secular mental model, some other insights will be obtained. Nietzsche discusses a mental model that, in my view, best suits the short term outcomes of the Iranian post election events. By short term I mean a forecast about the most probable scenario.

Clearly the commanding Ayatollahs currently own the weapons. So they do not have to rely on and use cogent arguments. In his book, *Twilight of Idols*, Nietzsche (1895) emphasizes that "wherever authority still forms part of good bearing, where one does not give reasons but commands, the logician is a kind of buffoon...one chooses logical argument only when one has no other means."

I was surprised when I saw that the Western media covered the news of violent street clashes by police, security agents and Basij militia, who used tear gas, batons, and even guns to suppress the angry crowds, as if it was an uncommon practice to curb social unrest. As Nietzsche emphasized "one chooses logical argument only when one has no other means." And I add that it is likely that only hard power, by which I mean any other means than argument, will determine the short term winner.

This mental model which dictates that the one with the weapon also has right on his side was best shown in a 2001 Academy Award-winning film depicting the tragedies of the Bosnia war. In a scene of the film *No Man's Land* when the Serb protagonist surrenders to the Bosnian soldier, a fierce argument starts between them to find a scapegoat presumably responsible for triggering the war. After trading insults with each other the Bosnian finally ceases arguing altogether and points the gun towards the Serb and asks him "who started the war?" The surrendered Serbian soldier, not having a weapon, has to admit that the Serbs were responsible and should be blamed. Later on in the scenario the Serb succeeds somehow in disarming the Bosnian and asks him the same question again, "who started the war?" The Bosnian soldier has to answer in favor of the Serb, "we started it."

Based on this mental model, the answer to the question "was there any fraud in the Iranian presidential election?" depends only on who owns the weapons, not on who presents the most cogent argument. Hence, in this mental model any kind of argument at best will appear to be the choice of, as Nietzsche points out, some "buffoons". If we want to see what might happen next in the scenario we have to see which rival camp can threaten the other through force and power. Currently Mr. Ahmadinejad's camp enjoys this position and accordingly he will be right "as long as he is not disarmed." ?Mr. Mousavi, remains "a buffoon, a surrendered disarmed soldier" unless he can find other means than issuing statements and appealing to logical argument.

Scenario 3: Children of Revolution - Creators of New Values

There is yet another aspect of Nietzsche's mental model that is worthwhile elaborating. The value of this alternative mental model lies in the metaphorical approach of Nietzsche (1891) to how an old value system is replaced by a new one. In his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra* he introduces "three metamorphoses of the spirit", and

explains "how the spirit becometh a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child."

In this model the camel spirit kneels before the great dragon of old values and wants to be well-laden. Its load-bearing spirit seeks all the heaviest things, a big set of "Thou-Shalts". Then "the camel hasteneth into the wilderness" when the second metamorphosis occurs and "the spirit becometh a lion". Now the lion says, "I will." However, "verily, there shall be no 'I will' any more. Thus speaketh the dragon." On the other hand, "to create new values- that, even the lion cannot yet accomplish." For this accomplishment the final metamorphosis has to happen, the lion should become a child. The German philosopher writes that "innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy Yea."

In almost every legitimacy crisis for the Iranian regime, including protests on the streets, a recurring theme is put forward. Will the people of Iran who act the camel role and say yes to every Thou Shalt by the government skip to the the lion stage? To answer this question, note the number of uprising incidents across the country which suggest that the society is going to abandon the camel mask and accept becoming a lion. But considering that Mr. Mousavi and Mr. Karroubi, another defeated reformist in the election, are both old men and loyal to the current establishment, it is unlikely that they can manage to bring about the third metamorphosis, that is becoming a forgetful child, urging a self-rolling wheel that may result in regime change in Iran.

The late Ayatollah Khomeini, as a semi-divine figure, was an exception to this general rule. Although too old as a political leader, he insisted on forgetting the Shah era's value system altogether. In a famous speech delivered on his return from exile in February in 1979, he dared to question the basic tenets of the monarchic establishment. "Suppose a nation, all of them, vote an individual to become their monarch," he said during an historical tirade to a weeping revolutionary crowd at Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, the graveyard of the revolution martyrs, "Alright since these people have their right over their fate and can choose their fate, their votes are for themselves, but if a nation vote also that the heirs of that individual will be monarchs, in that case they do not have any right at all to do so. People living fifty years ago do not have the right to determine the fate of the next generation. Every nation has their fate in its own hands." (Ayatollah Khomeini, 1979). He went on to reasonably conclude and convince the audience that the Pahlavi dynasty, the parliament, and the administration were "illegal" from the beginning. "How could our fathers have any right to be our custodians?" and determine our fate on our behalf, he further remarked.

In order to challenge the existing constitution and write a new one and therefore a new destiny, the children of revolution have to be both innocent and forgetful, which apparently they are. But the current opposition leaders, not innocent of course, have not yet declared that they tend to forget the past, the current structure and value system. Instead they have insisted on pursuing their demands within the framework of the same value system. Thus it appears that grass roots supporters are a number of steps ahead of their leaders. In this scenario they will seek a new generation of leaders who are able enough and can potentially create new alternative values systems. For example, this could be a secular state that will reject both the rule of monarchies and the rule of clerics. Therefore one can argue that this creates the precedent for some endless revolutions.

Scenario 4: Game of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos

Rejecting argument altogether, at least among the scholars, seems extremely inconvenient. Thus we need to shed some light on the election problem through examining the dynamics of mental interactions too. This is highly relevant in this special case because both sides repeatedly accuse each other of conducting psychological warfare.

Fortunately, a founding father of reasoning and argument, Aristotle provides us with a mental model. In *Rhetoric* he discussed three modes of persuasion, namely Pathos, Ethos, and Logos. Pathos includes emotional appeal that means making people's eyes wet, urging them to weep and to draw empathy and sympathy. Ethos is appealing to authority, the legal body, the knowledgeable and respectable person, anyone who has a high moral competence. And finally Logos concerns the world of numbers, statistics, and rational discourse.

Based on this mental model one can choose different preference patterns in the content of any psychological warfare. For example, PEL indicates that you put Pathos first, then Ethos, and finally Logos in terms of the content of information generated and distributed. There are of course many other combinations.

The game that subsequently starts may have winners and losers. For example, if an audience favors Logos and one party plays only Pathos and his opponent plays primarily Logos and to a less degree Ethos, then it is likely that the opponent will win. Game theory offers a solid foundation to mathematically formalize, then simulate and rigorously examine the dynamics of the interactions among different players. In the long run you can pin down some equilibrium points which will certainly hint at multiple and alternative outcomes of the current political crisis in Iran.

A formal content analysis of available information offers a sense of the exact preference patterns of both Mr. Ahmadinejad's and Mr. Mousavi's psychological warfare. Yet there are two other relatively passive players too: the Iranian people and the international community.

However, according to what I have read and seen until now both rivals have exploited all three modes with different degrees of frequency and intensity and therefore different preferences patterns. Mr. Ahmadinejad's camp appears to be in line with the EPL pattern with an obvious insistence on the role and the legal status of the Guardian Council and the ultimate arbiter, the Supreme Leader. For Mr. Mousavi's camp the content of psychological warfare seems to follow a PLE pattern, they generally act as victims, especially after the massive arrests, and appeal to numbers and reason to prove their case.

Based on my knowledge of Iranian culture I can tell that people generally favor something very close to the PEE pattern. For instance, holding sobbing rituals for the passion of The Fourteen Infallibles is a characteristic of Shia Islam. It seems that the international community, and in particular Western media, heavily invested their psychological warfare in a PPL pattern, close enough to that of Mr. Mousavi's camp. They tried to gain sympathy for defenseless protesters in the streets and made a symbol of a victim, Ms. Neda Agha Soltan. They also showed instances of appeal to Logos by demonstrating through statistics how the election panel possibly rigged the votes.

If we consider doing nothing, N, as an option too, then you may run a game theoretical analysis of $(4 \times 4 \times 4 = 64)$ pure strategies per each player which amount to a possibility space of $64 \times 64 \times 64 \times 64 = 16777216$ scenarios for the interaction of four players. However, most of these are not consistent with available information. For example a play consisting of PPP by both rivals, and people adopting LLL with the outside world playing NNN has to be ruled out because it is contrary to what we have already observed or expect to see in the future. Moreover some of the combinations are redundant. Therefore the possibility space tends to boil down to a more limited plausibility space that only includes some believable scenarios. Without a formal game theoretic analysis and counting as well the mixed strategies one cannot tell precisely what could be the equilibrium points of this game in the long term futures.

The battle ground for the psychological warfare is the mind of people. Obviously both the generals who command and control and the soldiers who perform the operations have to rely on the media as their major weapon. A crucial duty of them when using the weapon and conducting such a soft warfare is to design, provide and finally drop the so-called information bombs on the target population. These bombs consist of information packages in the form of some "breaking news", the content of which maybe interpreted through the Ethos, Pathos, and Logos elements and their combinations. To be effective and to achieve the desired objectives one should also take into account some important factors such as when, where, and how to release the information bombs. It is argued that the insights obtained from a formal game theoretic analysis of different players, their strategies, their payoffs, and their equilibrium points may help the commanders of the psychological warfare and the soldiers as well to carefully design the nature of events to attract attention, embark on subsequent coverage through the media, and more important decide when, where and how to release news items.

Scenario 5: Less Conspicuous Opposition Leaders

Studying biology and life itself is a valuable source of information and inspiration, not only for making artifacts but also for making sense of the information environment and the numerous human interactions we observe in our daily life. After all, we human beings are just another animal species.

One can think of survival and dominance in the wild to find some plausible scenarios for the futures of post-election Iran. The mating behavior of animals is particularly relevant here. For example, Sara Lewis, an evolutionary ecologist at Tufts University, and an expert on fireflies, recently observed *Photuris*, "a firefly that eats other fireflies." These nasty predators were more likely to attack when flash rates of males to attract females for nuptials were faster. In other words, "conspicuous flashes – the ones females prefer – also make males more likely to be killed." (Zimmer, 2009, p.2)

If we take the famous radical Iranian liberals and modernists who were arrested after election as the male fireflies, then hard line traditionalists supporting Mr. Ahmadinejad take the place of *Photuris* and the Iranian people in turn can be considered the female fireflies. But, according to Lewis's observation when "*Photuris* preda-

tors are around there's going to be a strong selection for less conspicuous flashes" among them.

Therefore by comparing metaphorically we may conclude that another plausible scenario is that, in the medium term, some moderate and "less conspicuous" liberals and modernists will become active and prominent as their renowned friends will have disappeared or been silenced by the nasty predators who belong to Mr. Ahmadinejad's camp.

Authorities loyal to Mr. Ahmadinejad tend to see the green movement, which has an eye towards a big change in Iran, as a velvet revolution being plotted and executed against them by some Western powers. They will use all the tools available to them to undermine this movement. Generally a predator politician in Iran, just like any other country, takes the initiative by arresting, threatening to arrest, or even torturing and killing the opposition leaders and their supporters. But the public at large, who as said above may figuratively take the role of female fireflies, have no way but to wait for a "delayed nuptial" with their favorite opposition leaders. If the natural mate selection among real fireflies is any guide for us to ponder about the future multiple courses of events in Iran then we can see a scenario plausible in which some unknown "less conspicuous" Iranian reformists and modernists will substitute for the famous suppressed figures

In this scenario, the question is who will take the initiative to support, train, and help to present those "less conspicuous" opposition groups that presumably nurture the next generation of opposition leaders. One possibility is that Mr. Ahmadinejad will see this a political opportunity and form an alternative puppet opposition himself.

Another possibility is that Western powers turn their support, maybe inevitably, toward founding something rather similar to the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The Congress was an anti-communist advocacy group that was active during the Cold War era and supported by the Central Intelligence Agency. This group took some credit for contributing to the collapse of the communist block.

Today building "moderate networks of Muslims" to counter political and fundamentalist Islam is being suggested and pursued by quite a number of policy analysts in different US think tanks such as RAND Corporation (Rabasa, Benard, Schwartz, & Sickle, 2007).

Scenario 6: Asabiya Away Sword Again

My final scenario is based on the Islamic-Arabic mental model of Ibn Khaldun, an ancient Muslim futurist who is considered now to be a founding father and pioneer of the scientific study of society. As a polymath, he suggested worthwhile, illuminating and insightful ideas and theories about the long term movements of nations, dynasties, and civilizations.

In his mental model (1377) we see the cycles of empires, civilizations, and dynasties. Central to his idea of subsequent cycles, that are related to the emergence of power systems and their later disappearance, is the concept of *Asabiya*. This Arabic word means a bond of cohesion among people, a common cause which is strongly shared. The new *Asabiya*, once formed, will challenge the existing and extended

power structure in which the old Asabiya is weakening. After the establishment of a new empire or dynasty it tends to grow and at the same time that bond of cohesion, that common cause, among founders and their heir declines again until it is too weak to resist some new Asabiya. Thus the conditions will become again ready for the emergence of some new people who enjoy a fledgling bond of cohesion among themselves. The newcomers assume the role of competitors and challenge the existing power structure and its members. This will in turn trigger the emergence of the next empire or dynasty. The same series of events and scenario will continue forever. It is this recurring theme that gets the cycles going on and on again.

Based on what Ibn Khaldun wrote centuries ago, statesmen usually rely on the sword and the pen to consolidate the power of a new regime. At the beginning of their cycle, however, they often use the sword and consider the pen simply as an administrative tool to execute decrees. At the end of their cycle, in their final hours, when the Asabiya is in decline and the regime is going to die out the sword is needed again, eclipsing the pen. The authorities have to rely on the sword not the pen to save the dying government. According to this mental model, when conjecturing about a plausible or even probable scenario after it is already evident that the authorities have switched to swords and prefer them to pens, one has to conclude that they simply are going to witness their bitter ending.

It is too early to judge the degree of cohesion among Mr. Mousavi's supporters. Nonetheless after the now infamous face-off between Mr. Ahmadinejad and Mr. Mousavi, it is clear that the Asabiya inside the regime has precipitously decreased. The political wound seems unlikely to heal soon. So far there have been also some creative forms of civil disobedience practiced by the grass roots. For instance, encouraging each other not to watch the programs and of course not to buy the products that are shown on the state run pro-Ahmadinejad television. The television as a monopolist giant media draws daily fortunes from commercial advertisements. Similarly people have tried to create electric power outages through overconsumption, especially in the capital. The general idea is that protesters should figure out and execute peaceful ways to put internal pressure on the government so that it has to pay a heavy price for any violent gesture.

Two critical elements are essential for the formation of Asabiya among people, one is the media and the other is able leaders and organizers. Both of these have been either removed or extremely constrained by Mr. Ahmadinejad government. In the absence of communication channels and coordinating leaders, as noted by the Schelling focal point, people tend to converge on what seems to be natural, special or relevant to them. Among many such natural and special focal points one can name the women's issue and their modernist demands, the need for friendly relationships with the world, and even labeling the incumbent as a dictator and standing against him. Mr. Mousavi in the same hot live debate with Mr. Ahmadinejad, explicitly warned that "the country is striding toward dictatorship."

It is worth noting that in the recent street protests young women unexpectedly took initiative and encouraged men not to be cowards and fearful of baton, tear gas, beating and arresting. Thus the new Asabiya that may eventually form is potentially matriarchal. Modernist young women tend to call for the termination of a remarkable

set of discriminations against them in family, employment, and public appearance laws. Their resentful feelings toward Mr. Ahmadinejad is reasonable and was expected. During his first term in the office, Iran's police revitalized the tough measures against women who were "insufficiently veiled" and "flagrantly" exhibited a corruption of Islamic values in their public appearance (Al Jazeera, 2007). In such a feminine revolt scenario Mr. Ahmadinejad has to fight on three fronts. First the Iranian predominantly women-controlled households, second universities in which the matriculation rate already favours women, and finally the work environment public and private, particularly in large cities, which is almost occupied by the cheap, reliable, and, ironically, obedient female employees. However, the emergence of a remarkable female opposition leader, who will not have to act under the umbrella of a remarkable father, brother, husband, or any other male relative should be considered a wild card scenario, that is an event that will be extremely unlikely but with some huge consequences for the Iranian politics and the society as well.

Concluding Remarks

In the above discussion I let my mind and imagination run free and tried to switch among diverse mental models. For a genuine modern futurist there is no such thing as a single predictable future but only multiple scenarios which are supposed to be equally plausible. We create scenarios to challenge our mental models. And we use distinguished mental models to make sense of the environment and then build multiple scenarios. It is an iterative process which is essential for strategic learning and knowledge sharing. The issues of probability and preferability tend to fall outside and beyond the core of a typical scenario planning exercise. Thus explicitly addressing them would require another independent examination.

The future remains uncertain and potentially wonderful to discover. But as Ibn Khaldun pointed out "making efforts and paying attention to knowing the fate of affairs ahead of time and becoming aware of future events and consequences is a characteristic of the human spirit." We need to understand the driving forces behind the survival and death of governments. The six scenarios presented here, together, may provide a framework for sense making of the Iranian post election crisis. The first scenario is argued as the overarching conceptual framework because as noted Iranian people are Muslims and tend to interpret the course of future events in the light that "**Allah knows and is behind the ultimate winner**". The scenario of "**Weapons prevail Logic fails**" although relevant for the short term maybe misleading because the scenario of "**Asabiya Away Sword Again**" suggests that using violence and crushing the protests may not guarantee some long term stability but could be itself a sign of the beginning of an end. The "**Children of Revolution Creators of New Values**" and "**Less Conspicuous Opposition Leaders**" scenarios highlight the need for a new generation of leaders, not the current renowned figures, to enable big changes in Iran. And eventually the "**Game of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos**" scenario emphasizes the role of the information bomb. Such bombs are an essential part of any carefully designed schemes of psychological warfare, the winner of which has to have a good understanding of the equilibrium points in a rather extended maneuvering space of plausible combinations.

Correspondence

Vahid V. Motlagh
Founder and Editor
Vahid Think Tank Website
Tehran, Iran
Skype (by appointment): vahid.vahidi.motlagh
Phone: +98-912-3906470
<http://www.vahidthinktank.com>
E-mail: vahidvmotlagh@gmail.com

References

- Al Jazeera. (2007). Iran veil crackdown criticised. Retrieved July 15, 2009, from <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2007/04/2008525142720801481.html>
- Ayatollah Khomeini, Ruhollah. (1979). (in Farsi) *Transcript of speech at Behesht-e Zahra cemetery*. Retrieved July 15, 2009, from <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/pages/?cid=34844>
- Bishop, Peter, Andy Hines, & Terry Collins. (2007). The current state of scenario development: An overview of techniques. *Foresight*, 9(1), 2-25.
- Bood, Robert, & Theo Postma. (1997). Strategic learning with scenarios. *European Management Journal*, 15(6), 633-647.
- Chermack, Thomas J. (2003). The role of scenarios in altering mental models and building organizational knowledge. *Futures Research Quarterly*, Spring, 25-41.
- Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ali Akbar. (2008). (in Farsi) *Hope and anxiety: Diaries of Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in 1985-86*. Tehran, Iran: Daftare Nashre Maarefe Enghelab. Retrieved July 15, 2009, from http://www.shifteshab.com/ebook/Omid_va_Delvapasi.pdf
- Ibn, Khaldun. (1377). (in Farsi) *Muqaddimah* (translated by Mohammad Parvin Gonabadi). Tehran, Iran: Enteshart Elmi Farhangi.
- Inayatullah, Sohail (Ed.). (2004). *The causal layered analysis (CLA) reader: Theory and case studies of an integrative and transformative methodology*. Taipei, Taiwan: Tamkang University Press.
- Neitzche, Friedrich. (1891). *Thus spake zarathustra* (translated by Thomas Common). Retrieved July 15, 2009, from <http://philosophy.eserver.org/nietzsche-zarathustra.txt>
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1895). *Twilight of the idols* (translated by Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale). Retrieved July 15, 2009, from <http://www.handprint.com/SC/NIE/GotDamer.html#sect2>
- Schoemaker, Paul J. H. (1993). Multiple scenario development: Its conceptual and behavioral foundation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 14, 193-213.
- Quran, Suras: 7, 10, 13, 15, 23, 30, 53.
Retrieved July 15, 2009, from
http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/arabicscript/Ayat/7/7_34.htm
http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/arabicscript/Ayat/10/10_49.htm
http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/arabicscript/Ayat/13/13_11.htm
http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/arabicscript/Ayat/15/15_5.htm

http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/arabicscript/Ayat/23/23_43.htm

http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/arabicscript/Ayat/30/30_4.htm

http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/arabicscript/Ayat/53/53_39.htm

Rabasa, Angel, Cheryl Benard, Lowell H. Schwartz, & Peter Sickle. (2007). *Building moderate muslim networks*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation. Retrieved July 15, 2009, from <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG574/>

Zimmer, Carl. (2009). Blink twice if you like me. *The New York Times*. Retrieved July 15, 2009, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/30/science/30firefly.html>

About the author

Vahid Vahidi Motlagh is a 30-year-old Iranian futurist who lives in Tehran. He is a member of the World Futures Studies Federation and also a board member of the Shaping Tomorrow's Foresight Network. Motlagh is a graduate of civil engineering from Sharif University of Technology and reads English, Arabic, and Farsi. Before leaving a foresight expert career in Iran in 2008 he was for ten years a strategic planning analyst and editor at different Iranian Think Tanks and was a major contributor to the Persian Encyclopedia of Futures. He has authored and translated more than ten Farsi books, two of them award winning, with the theme of science and technology foresight as well as futures studies and decision analysis tools and methods. His website is accessible at <http://www.vahidthinktank.com>. Motlagh welcomes immigration opportunities to broaden his experience through international work or study and research programs.

