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## Tension Simmers in Iran

By William Pfaff

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PARIS — The immense crowd of protesters that accompanied the funeral of the political dissident Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, and the even larger protest expected Sunday, identify either a pre-revolutionary situation in Iran, or that condition which the French call "fin de regime" — political decadence suggesting that the end may be near, but might also be very bad.

Sunday will be the major religious holiday known as Ashura, as well as the seventh day following the Ayatollah Montazeri's death — an important occasion in the Shi'ite mourning ritual.

Ashura marks the martyrdom in 680 of one of most important figures in the development of Shi'ism, Husayn Ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and regarded as an enemy of injustice, tyranny, and oppression. The coincidence of memorials is decidedly inconvenient for the present unjust, tyrannical, and oppressive rulers of Iran.

The popular protest that began last June against vote-count manipulation in the contested re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and against the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who supports him, are continuing despite killings, beatings, arrests and more or less arbitrary imprisonments of demonstrators and their leaders.

The events resemble those that led up to the revolution that compelled the Shah to flee Iran in 1979 and were followed by the creation of the Islamic Republic.

That was the end of the Shah's monarchy, which, for all of its film-set decor, and his ambition to become President Richard Nixon's American "Middle Eastern gendarme," was produced by a military coup d'état in 1921 by his grandfather, an army officer.

The leader of the coup made himself prime minister of the regime — under dual Russian and British military occupation — which was ended by the new leader.

He deposed the about-to-become-redundant shah of the Qajar dynasty (who had himself been put on his throne as a child by a military coup) and proclaimed himself Reza Shah Pahlavi, founding the new, if short-lived, Pahlavi dynasty. In 1941 he was removed by Britain and Russia because of his inclination towards Germany.

His son was placed on the throne, and kept there after the Second World War, against parliamentary protest, by a CIA-MI6 coup. He carried out land reform and gave women the vote in national elections. In 1971 he celebrated the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great with a huge party at Persepolis, with chiefs of state and international café society invited. (The Queen of England was indisposed, but not Prince Philip).

His dynasty was terminated in 1979 by popular demand for Islamic rule by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who for the previous 15 years had lived in a Paris suburb, smuggling pamphlets, sermons and tape recordings back into Iran.

The past of modern Iran is thus a succession of foreign occupations and interventions, dynastic changes and coups d'état, religious enthusiasms and reforms, contrary but sometimes convergent revolutionary and religious ambitions, and enduring enmity for old enemies; some in the crowds of protestors in Tehran recently denouncing President Ahmadinejad denounced the British empire and the American as well.

Meanwhile, Israel wants Iranian nuclear sites bombed. Nobody in American government will "take anything off the table" in threatening Iran. Certainly nobody will leave Iran alone, and everyone affects to tremble at the threat of Ahmadinejad's suicide-bomb. That is what it would be, since it would have no active use other than to make Israelis and Americans fear Iran. Possibly, with a mistake in timing, we could one day see Israelis and Americans bombing democratic demonstrators in Iran.

Among the important forces in Iran's population today are a generation of war veterans (of the Iran-Iraq war, 1980-88, in which a million Iranians died); an army of 325,000 men, two-thirds conscripts, whose command and cadres have recent experience of a desperate war; the veteran Revolutionary Guards (radical Iran-Iraq war volunteers who feel their time to be repaid for their sacrifices has come, if not passed); and the Basij — which the Guard controls — a "popular mobilization army," potentially a million strong, active in repressing this year's demonstrations.

The population has an overwhelmingly young profile. The university generation is "wired" and in touch with the world. Popular aspirations, as far as one can make them out, are anti-regime but not anti-religious.

Finally, perhaps the most significant military factor in Iran's situation today is that there currently are 134,000 U.S. soldiers still in Iraq, whom Iran would quite likely attack if Israel (or the United States) bombed Iranian nuclear sites.