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## Ahmadinejad: Iran's Man of Mystery

By Joe Klein

At precisely the moment that Barack Obama plus the leaders of Britain and France were announcing the existence of the secret Iranian nuclear facility near Qum, a group of TIME editors were sitting down to interview Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at his New York City hotel. Our strategy was to avoid the obvious questions — Ahmadinejad has been grilled relentlessly about his heinous views on the Holocaust — but there was an obvious question that needed to be asked immediately: What was his reaction to the impending Obama statement? He seemed befuddled. His first response was incomprehensible: "So, is all the information that Mr. Obama receives of the same nature?" TIME's managing editor, Rick Stengel, asked the question again, and this time the response was thin defiance — "If I were Mr. Obama's adviser, I would definitely ask him to refrain from making this statement, because it is definitely a mistake" — followed by the standard claim that Iran was in full compliance with the international Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that it had signed — "We have no secrecy, and we work within the framework of the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency]." ([Watch a video of TIME's interview with Ahmadinejad.](#))

The last claim is palpably untrue. Iran has refused to provide all the information required under the treaty, which is why it is the subject of U.N. sanctions. The Qum facility may not be a smoking gun — it hasn't even been loaded yet — but it is a covert operation of some sort, perhaps a bomb-making facility, perhaps a research-and-development shop. It is the latest evidence in Iran's history of attempting to hoodwink the rest of the world about its nuclear program. A similar game was played with the uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz, which was exposed in 2002.

But for those of us who sat with Ahmadinejad, the real headline was his apparent cluelessness. It was almost as if Obama's announcement had taken him by surprise. It is well known that Ahmadinejad doesn't have operational control over the nuclear program or Iranian foreign policy — that resides with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei — but the exact extent of his powers, beyond management of the domestic economy, remains a mystery. He did not seem very powerful to us. His answers to our questions were sometimes opaque, often blatantly false, though not confrontational. Almost every question brought forth a flurry of crib notes hastily scribbled and shoved in his hands by his advisers. It was all very odd.

He refused to say what he had done during the national trauma of the Iran-Iraq war, whether he had seen combat or lost friends. When I asked his opinion of former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's famous 2001 Quds Day speech, in which he called for an "Islamic bomb" to counter Israel's nuclear arsenal, Ahmadinejad denied that Rafsanjani had ever made such a speech. I said that I'd been there, using an official Iranian translator, and that the speech had made headlines worldwide. "None of the Iranians here around the table recall such a statement," he said — and the assembled Marx brothers turned to stone. Well, I asked, what about the argument itself, that Iran needed a nuclear weapon to deter Israel? "We believe that the Zionist regime is too little to be able to pose a threat to Iran," he said. "We feel nuclear weapons have no application whatsoever in this time and age ... In my opinion, in our opinion, the atomic bomb is a concept that belongs to the previous century." ([Watch a video of Joe Klein on Ahmadinejad.](#))

Do you believe him? Nope, me neither — but I am also not convinced that Iran intends to build a nuclear weapon. "I think they're hedging," says Jim Walsh of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a nonproliferation expert who speaks frequently with the Iranians. "I don't think they've made a weapon decision, but I do think they want breakout capability" — the ability, similar to Japan's, to quickly assemble a bomb if necessary. "If you actually build a bomb, you start incurring real international costs, as the North Koreans have," added Walsh, referring to the fact that the Russians and Chinese have joined the West in applying strict sanctions and other countermeasures against the regime in Pyongyang.

Despite the rants about "mad mullahs" and neoconservative calls for regime change, the Iranians have been careful about their foreign policy in recent years. As the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate found, they respond to international pressure. They are an obnoxious regime, but only a second-level danger to the U.S. The Obama Administration should continue its attempts to engage the Iranians while preparing to contain and deter them if they actually try to build a bomb. It should not revert to the foolish bellicosity of the last Administration. And there is good news: Ahmadinejad assured us that he would not attempt to change Iran's constitution and run for a third term in 2013. That should come as some small relief to the mass of Iranians who yearn to breathe free.