



The other weapon of mass destruction in Iran

Updated 2d 21h ago

By **Chuck Raasch**

WASHINGTON — Nearly four dozen heads of state, protected by military vehicles and metal barriers that created a temporary green zone in the heart of the capital, gathered here this week to agree to crack down on the threat of nuclear proliferation.

Less than a mile away, in a much lower-key symposium at [George Washington University](#), Iranian journalists and authors discussed another large-scale destructive weapon: state control of information and thought.

It is important to understand [Iran's](#) role in both discussions. [Azar Nafisi](#), a best-selling Iranian author who was banned from the University of [Tehran](#) in 1981 for refusing to wear a veil, said her native country is "the answer to many of the very important problems that we will be facing today."

The Iranian government's nuclear development program — which the U.S. and its allies say is cover for a destabilizing weapons program — is likely to draw tougher sanctions as a result of the conference called by President [Barack Obama](#).

But on the other question, the assault on information, less of a consensus has been reached. The Iranian government's increasingly sophisticated

attempts to jam or shut down Internet and satellite transmissions, and its willingness to jail and torture those who speak out against the regime, have placed it on the wrong side of technology and history. Despite daily threats to their freedom, Iranian journalists, bloggers and activists are playing what one participant in a forum at George Washington University called a high-stakes game of "cat and mouse" against government censors and jailers. [Twitter](#) emerged as a global social network force during Iran's violent crackdown last year on the pro-democracy Green Revolution.

"The government has cast the net so wide now. ... The sophistication cannot be overstated," said Geneive Abdo, who was the first American journalist based in Tehran since the 1979 Iranian revolution.

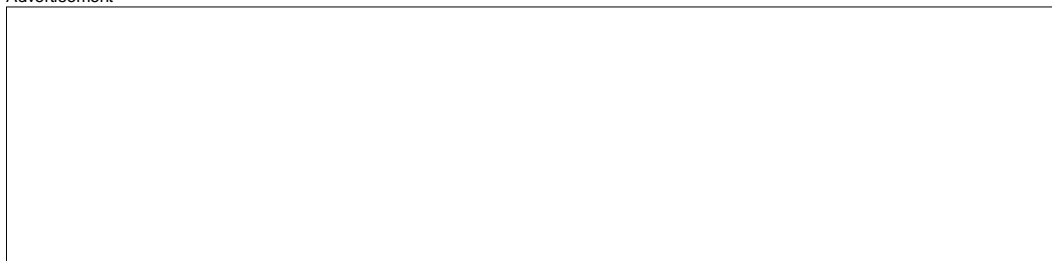
Abdo, now an Iran analyst for the Century Foundation policy research organization, said recipients of e-mails that the Iranian government deems threatening have been detained within two days of receiving them.

"It's quite frightening," said Abdo, who blogs at [www.insideiran.org](#). She is also part of a task force of private and government experts on Iran that is trying to coax international partners to bring more high-speed Internet and other technological aid for Iranians fighting their government's censorship.

It is an abject failure of American diplomacy, media and citizenship that most Americans understand so little about the Iranian people.

The irony, according to Mohammad Tabaar, a BBC World Service reporter and author of "The Beloved Great Satan: The Portrayal of the U.S. in the Iranian Media Since 9/11," is that rank-and-file Iranians may be the most pro-American of any in the Muslim world, despite the Iranian regime's state-media drumbeat of the U.S. as a "wicked, immoral society

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that is about to collapse."

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Yet because of sanctions and tensions between the two governments, it is more difficult for Iranians to get visas to travel to the United States than it is for travelers from almost any other Muslim country, he and other activists said.

When there are exchanges, the discourse is productive for both sides, said Sonya Reines-Djivanides of Search for Common Ground, a private international conflict resolution organization based in Washington. Most Iranians know far more about Americans than vice versa. Reines-Djivanides recounted a recent exchange in which Americans were greeted in rural Iranian villages by Iranians who wanted to talk about television shows like "Dr. Phil" and "Desperate Housewives."

Mohamed Abdel Dayem, the Middle East and North Africa program coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists, estimates that 70,000 Iranians blog on politics, culture, religion and other topics. Journalists say the Iranians are far more diverse than depicted outside Iran, as evidenced by rising opposition from conservative clerics concerned about Iran's human rights record.

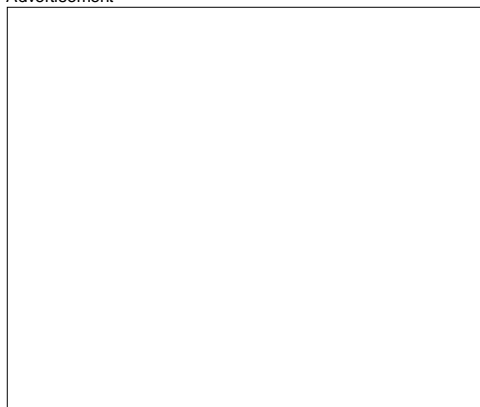
Nafisi, whose "Reading Lolita" was on the [New York Times](#) bestseller list for more than two years, said her country's 7,000-year history is far more diverse, far more tolerant and far more "sensual" than today's cliché of punitive clerics and women behind veils.

That depiction is an "insult to Islam," she said, arguing that religion in Iraq is as diverse as "Sarah Palin Christians" and "Barack Obama Christians" in the United States. Long before the current regime, Iranians believed that "their rights are not something that the shah could give them so an ayatollah could take them away," she said.

Indeed, in the 1960s, Nafisi's mother became one of the first female members of the Iranian parliament — a revolutionary breakthrough at that time. Female representation in the American government did not really pick up until the 1980s, when more women were elected to Congress and [Sandra Day O'Connor](#) was appointed to the Supreme Court.

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