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Profile: Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Iran's Radical Turned Reformist

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Why Mir-Hossein Mousavi Matters:

Mir-Hossein Mousavi is the reformists' leading candidate and challenger to incumbent [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) in the 2009 Iranian presidential election. Mousavi is not well known. But to call him a liberal is likely an overstatement. As Iran's prime minister during the Iranian Revolution's most formative years (1981-1989) he was a hard-liner closely allied with then-president [Ali Khamenei](#), the current [Supreme Leader](#), and a "firm radical," as *The Economist* described him in 1988. Still, Mousavi's 20-year absence from Iranian politics and his recent emphasis on moderation has the West, and young Iranians, beguiled.



As prime minister of Iran from 1981 to 1989, Mir-Hossein Mousavi was a hard-line radical. As a presidential candidate against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, he's recast himself as a moderate reformer.

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Mousavi's Youth, and American "Student" Days:

Mir-Hossein Mousavi was born Sept. 29, 1941, in Khameneh, in the Iranian northwest panhandle province of East Azarbaijan. He was trained as an architect and a town planner. His early years under the shah of Iran are obscure, but he told a *New York Times* reporter in 1981 that three years earlier, when the shah was still in power, Mousavi had visited the United States on a student visa—to organize opposition to the shah. Mousavi returned to the United States in 1981, as foreign minister (a post he held five months), to address the United Nations General Assembly.

Defending the Taking of American Hostages:

In that 1981 interview, Mousavi defended the taking and holding of American hostages by Iranian militants for 444 days as serving the revolution's purpose. "It was the beginning of the second stage of our revolution," following the overthrow of the shah, he said. "It was after this that we rediscovered our true Islamic identity. After this, we felt the sense that we could look Western policy in the eye and analyze it the way they had been evaluating us for many years." The seizure also ended for good any pro-American leanings in Iran, he said. He became prime minister in November 1981 at age 39.

Mousavi, Radical Prime Minister, 1981-1988:

In October August 1984, the Iranian parliament voted 163-21 to ratify his nomination as prime minister. He had Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's endorsement. A year later, opposition to his policies increased significantly as reflected in a ratification vote of 162-73.

Mousavi's reputation for radicalism was undiminished. When he introduced his cabinet in 1985, he boasted that his interior minister, Ali Akbar Mohtashami, was a religious conservative who'd built his reputation while building Hezbollah, the Party of God, in Lebanon.

Mousavi's parliamentary followers supported continuing terrorist operations in Lebanon.

At the end of the Iran-Iraq war in August 1988, when Ali Rafsanjani, the speaker of Iran's parliament at the time (and the current head of the powerful [Assembly of Experts](#)) suggested that Iran should accept some western help with reconstruction, Mousavi disagreed, claiming the move would betray the ideals of the revolution.

Mousavi consistently favored state controls over the economy rather than free-market policies. Iran's business class doesn't like him. He had also opposed ending the Iran-Iraq war, claiming that "a large portion of the masses" were indignant over the cease-fire.

Mousavi and the Iran-Contra Affairs:

Mir Hussein Mousavi had a direct role in the arms-for-hostages scandal known as the Iran-Contra affairs that involved secret negotiations between the Reagan administration and the Iranian regime to secure the release of American hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. (Read more about the [Iran-Contra affairs](#).) Mousavi worked closely with Khamenei, the president at the time, bargaining for 504 high-powered [TOW anti-tank missiles](#) (for use in the Iran-Iraq war, in which the United States supported Iran's enemy) while promising to release hostages in September 1985.

Mousavi's Anti-Americanism:

Mousavi neither liked nor trusted Americans. He led Iran's boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics to protest U.S. foreign policy from Central American to the Middle East. He opposed warming relations with the U.S. The arms-for-hostages dealings soured his impressions further. "Iran has friendly relations with many countries," Mousavi said on Iranian radio on Nov. 5, 1986, "but negotiations with the United States in light of its crimes against the Islamic Revolution will never take place." Of course, Mousavi was covering up (as the Reagan administration did) what had become public.

Obscurity After 1989, then Resurgence:

When Ali Rafsanjani was elected president in 1989, a post he held until 1997, one of his earliest moves was to oust Mousavi and other hard-liners from government (the prime minister's position had been scrapped by a constitutional amendment, but Rafsanjani did not invite Mousavi to be part of his government). From that point on, until 2008, Mousavi was out of the public eye. It's not clear why Mousavi left public life after 1989, the year Khomeini died. But his absence was almost total. He returned to architecture and teaching, and was an adviser to President [Mohammed Khatami](#) (1997-2005).

Mousavi on a Nuclear Iran:

Mousavi, like all other major Iranian politicians, is opposed to suspending the country's nuclear-enrichment program. He does not equate nuclear enrichment with a nuclear weapons program, however, and seeks to pursue dialogue with the West from that principle. "I consider détente the principle to build confidence between Iran and other countries," he [told](#) the Financial Times. "I think the recent discourse, which differentiates between nuclear technology and nuclear weapons is a good one. The more this differentiation is emphasized, the greater the possibility of détente."

Reformer or Chameleon? :

References to Mousavi as a "reformer" and a "moderate" have been oddly reflexive in the Western press, and particularly the American press. The characterizations are at best premature, and likely outright fabrications—unless Mousavi himself has disassembled his ideology and reconstructed it of more moderate parts.

That seems unlikely.

Mousavi's more patrician tone and sharper intellect distance him from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and seduce a young generation that never knew his radicalism and apologies for terror and bloodshed. But his policies and ideology, his faithfulness to the Islamic revolution, his economic policies, and his anti-Americanism are all of a piece with Ahmadinejad's. His election to the Iranian presidency may signal a change in tone, but not a change in policies.

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