

# Correspondence

## Iran's election: a critical view

As representatives of the International Community of Iranian Academics (ICOIA), an independent network, we think that your News story on the election of Masoud Pezeshkian as Iran's president (see *Nature* **631**, 490–491; 2024) presents an overly optimistic view of his reformist credentials.

Pezeshkian has long been aligned with the Iranian regime's religious ideology. He has, for example, boasted of his part in the 1980 'cultural revolution' that shut down Iran's universities for three years and purged thousands of students and faculty members. His role in enforcing the wearing of the hijab and other repressive measures is well documented.

Most Iranians chose to boycott the elections. Student organizations criticized the presidential candidates as serving a regime at war with its people. Iran's refusal to release data on voters raises concerns about the integrity and legitimacy of the electoral process.

The ICOIA calls on the global scientific community to critically evaluate the regime's promises of reform, and to support Iranian scholars and students who risk their lives and careers to defend academic freedom and human rights.

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## Iran's election: an opportunity for science diplomacy

Your News article on Iran's presidential election (*Nature* **631**, 490–491; 2024) indicates that the unexpected victory of Masoud Pezeshkian, a cardiologist and former minister of health, could usher in opportunities for Iran's scientists to engage with their Western peers. Given Pezeshkian's stated intent to seek a new path in interactions with the world, Western countries should reciprocate.

Since 2000, more than 1,500 scientists from 120 institutions in Iran and the United States have participated in joint research projects, supported by the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine and others. Together with Iranian colleagues, one of us (J.M.) was involved in a project to translate successful elements of Iran's primary-care model to rural Mississippi (see [go.nature.com/3x0ht4](https://go.nature.com/3x0ht4)).

With the worsening of relations between the United States and Iran since 2016, research collaboration has ended. Yet these projects have a proven track record in improving lives, even across the deepest political divides. Despite current tensions, we think that past successes provide a valuable road map for science-led diplomacy for both sides at this critical time.

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## Child-rearing skills might not be innate

Your News Feature (*Nature* **632**, 22–24; 2024) highlights efforts to identify how and why the human brain changes through pregnancy. The article emphasizes the hypothesis that these changes prepare pregnant people for parenthood. As neuroscientists and clinicians working with pregnant individuals and new parents to study these changes, we are concerned about the potential unintended impacts of overstressing this hypothesis.

For those at risk of depression or otherwise struggling with the challenges of caring for their child, the idea that birthing parents innately 'know' how to connect and respond to their newborns could be invalidating and undermine their mental health. A belief that pregnancy itself confers specialized competencies could also make the distribution of childcare responsibilities along gender lines even more unequal.

Pregnancy-related brain changes might be mainly by-products of physiological and hormonal changes to support the developing fetus, without direct implications for caring behaviours (E. F. Cárdenas *et al. Soc. Cogn. Affect. Neurosci.* **15**, 1097–1110; 2020). Evolutionary theory provides a plausible account in which direct contact with children and close observation of caring behaviour in others prepares people for parenthood (R. Sear *Curr. Opin. Psychol.* **7**, 98–103; 2016).

These explanations are not mutually exclusive. A more cautious perspective is essential so as not to set unrealistic expectations for new parents.

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## Study the long-term human fallout of war

Research by historians, political scientists and environmental scientists is increasingly showing that the environmental effects of war have long-term humanitarian consequences. Conflicts worldwide, including in Burkina Faso, Gaza, Haiti, Mali, Sudan and Ukraine, demand multidisciplinary research to understand and address this global challenge.

'Environcide' – the destruction of environmental infrastructure – is a feature of military actions with consequences including famine, disease and forced migration (E. Kreike *Scorched Earth* Princeton Univ. Press, 2021). At the site of the Battle of the Somme in France, heavy-metal levels that are above baseline values more than a century after the end of the First World War suggest there is a risk of bioaccumulation and health consequences long after active combat (O. H. Williams & N. L. J. Rintoul-Hynes *Eur. J. Soil Sci.* **73**, e13297; 2022). Unexploded ordnance in what were once Cambodia's most fertile lands have left a legacy of reduced yield and income (E. Lin *Am. J. Polit. Sci.* **66**, 222–237; 2022).

A more comprehensive understanding of the long-term environmental and humanitarian legacy of warfare will require collaboration across fields. There is a growing imperative not just to minimize wartime environmental damage, but also to understand, from a similarly integrative, multidisciplinary perspective, how best to remediate and restore land, or set it aside, in the wake of war.

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