



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

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Iran's Internal Dynamics

by Amin Tarzi

Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has never been free of political intrigue. However, since the disputed June 2009 presidential election, the level of intrigue has increased. And the recent public rift between the two highest office holders—the unelected supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the elected president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad—may very well be pushing Iran and the Islamic Republic regime close to the brink. While the denouement of this latest political wrangling has yet to be written, the “writing on the wall” suggests that the results will be anything but anti-climatic.

Prior to the 2009 presidential election and the internal fallout that ensued, the Islamic Republic's leadership structure, while perplexing and labyrinthine, was intelligible. The office of the supreme leader was, both on paper and in fact, the final arbiter, an impartial entity external to and above the governing administrative structures. The person of Khamenei and his position served as the source of ultimate legitimacy within the Islamic Republic regime and as the regime's guardian. That all changed with the Supreme Leader's blatant and unquestioned support of Ahmadinejad prior to the election and after his controversial victory. This action removed any lingering sense that the office of the supreme leader and the person of Khamenei were impartial and above political machinations and manipulations. [1]

While most of the world's attention was focused on the activities of the popular opposition and its Green Revolution after the controversial electoral outcome, a rift emerged between the Supreme Leader and his chosen candidate, the reelected President. The alliance formed for political expediency prior to the 2005 presidential election to keep the pragmatist and reformist camps from political position and strengthened in the run up to the 2009 election now seemed to be unraveling. The confident, newly reelected President began asserting his independence and, in the minds of the conservatives aligned with Khamenei, deviating from the correct path of the Islamic Revolution.

IRAN'S INTERNAL DYNAMICS... (CONTINUED ON PG 2)

MES Notes

MES 2011-12 Lecture Series

MES at MCU is hosting a Lecture Series throughout the 2010-2011 Academic Year entitled “Orienting our Sights on the Future: The Opportunities and Challenges of the Arab Revolts”.

The first lecture in the series held October 6, 2011 is featured on page 4 of this issue of MES Insights.

Further information and resources pertaining to the MES Lecture Series, are available at:
<http://www.mcu.usmc.mil>, under the Middle East Studies tab or via Facebook at: middleeaststudies.mcu.

POC for the MES Lecture Series is Mr. Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu.

MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

In boxing terms, the gloves came off. In July 2009, the president appointed Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei as the first vice president, but Khamenei pressured Ahmadinejad to reverse the appointment. While caving to this demand of the Supreme Leader, Ahmadinejad challenged Khamenei by appointing Mashaei as his chief of staff. Furthermore, in December, Ahmadinejad, reportedly per insistence of Mashaei, fired his foreign minister, Manouchehr Motaki while the latter was on an official visit to Africa. Motaki's dismissal was regarded as a rebuke to Khamenei for preventing Mashaei's appointment to the post of first vice presidency. The tensions between the office of the president and that of the supreme leader continued to escalate, and mostly in public, until the two offices came to blows over Ahmadinejad's dismissal and his forced reinstatement of intelligence minister, Haydar Moslehi, in April 2011. The growing animosity between the two men and their respective offices is evidence of the widening crack in the Islamic Republic's governing regime, something not seen since the very early days of the revolution.

IRGC Flexes Its Muscle

Lieutenant General Mohammad Ali Jafari, Commander of Islamic Republic Guard Corps (IRGC), declared in a July 2011 interview that the IRGC, acting as commissars of Iran's judicial branch, arrested a number of deviant individuals on charges of economic and moral violations. [2] These individuals also happened to have close ties to supporters of Ahmadinejad and Mashaei, or the true figures of the "digressive current," as Jafari insinuated. What this announcement suggests is that the IRGC is seeking to expand its authority within the Islamic Republic regime. Yes, the IRGC has in the past warned former president Mohammad Khatami not to stray too far off the path of the Islamic Revolution; however, it was done via private correspondence, not via the press and not without the usual deference to the office of the supreme leader to which the IRGC is subservient. The IRGC's main mission is to safeguard the Islamic Revolution, including the office of the supreme leader. Throughout the existence of the Islamic Republic, the powers of the judiciary have been kept, at least ostensibly, outside the authority of the IRGC. Jafari's public declaration that his forces are in fact acting as enforcers of the law is a potential game changer and is an affirmation of what was anticipated in the first issue of the Middle East Studies Insights, in January 2010, that "as the Iranian leadership continues to scramble to regain order and legitimacy, the door has been opened for the... IRGC to step in amid the power struggle with clinched fists to fill the power vacuum... leaving the hardliners in the IRGC ranks as the powerbrokers and eventual deciders of the course of action for the Islamic Republic." [3] The power balance has shifted. With Khamenei's unprecedented overt support of Ahmadinejad and the subsequent public sparring between former allies, Khamenei and his office lost much credibility, becoming more dependent on the IRGC for safeguarding the Islamic Republic regime and thus, changing the relationship between the supreme leader and the IRGC from one of leader and follower to that of interdependency for mutual survival.

Elimination of the Presidential System?

Khamenei in a recent speech reinforced the elevated position of his office, stressing that the role of the office of the supreme leader was to manage not administer and that he, as leader, was charged with overseeing the administrative branches of the government and guarding the general direction of the Islamic Republic regime. He also hinted during that speech that if necessary the Islamic Republic might change the current presidential system into a parliamentary system of government [4]. This was no veiled threat. Through this speech, Khamenei issued a warning to Ahmadinejad and his supporters that they as individuals as well as the top elected administrative branch of government could be sacrificed if required to safeguard the Islamic Republic regime and that he, Khamenei, has the authority to carry this out. But does he?

MES Notes (cont.)

26 September 2011

Dr. Tarzi presented a talk entitled "The current political landscape in Iran: challenges and opportunities, a vision from the United States", at Casa Asia, Barcelona, Spain.

27 September 2011

Dr. Tarzi presented a talk entitled "Iran's Policies and Options in the 'Af-Pak' Region", at Casa Asia, Madrid, Spain.

28 September 2011

Dr. Tarzi led a roundtable discussion entitled "Af-Pak Conflict and Its Regional Implications", at the Center for Advanced National Defense Studies, School of Advanced Defense Studies, Madrid.

29 September 2011

Dr. Tarzi presented a talk entitled "Global Security: A Perspective from the United States", at 19th International Defense Seminar "Global Security and Emerging Powers in a Multi-Polar World", Jaca, Spain.

End of the Islamic Republic?

The question remains whether Khamenei and the office of the supreme leader enjoy the level of support that they had prior to 2005, especially in light of the 2009 election and ensuing political maneuvering. If not, then that leaves room for the IRGC to "insert self" as the true guardian of the administrative systems of the Islamic Republic and to sideline the office of the supreme leader or to alter its authorities if the Islamic Republic regime or the IRGC itself requires it. This would end the Islamic Republic of Iran as we know it since 1979. In a twist of irony, Ahmadinejad, the man who has come to personify all that is negative about the regime in Tehran, may in fact be the albatross that is now hanging on the neck of the Islamic Republic.

Iran Notes:

[1] Amin Tarzi and Adam Seitz, "Iran at a Crossroad" MES Insights, Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2010.

[2] "Sepah zabet-e dastgah-e qazayi dar barkhord ba jaryan-e enherafi ast" Mehr News Agency, 5 July 2011, www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsPrint.aspx?NewsID=1351670, accessed 3 November 2011.

[3] Tarzi and Seitz, "Iran at a Crossroad".

[4] "Bayanat-e rahbar-e muazam-e enqelab dar didar ba daneshgahyan-e ostan-e Kermanshah" The Office of the Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Khamenei, 16 October 2011, www.leader.ir/langs/fa/print.php?sec=bayanat&id=8729, accessed 31 October 2011.

MES Publications

MES Occasional Papers No. 1, "Saddam's Nuclear Vision: An Atomic Shield and Sword for Conquest," Norman Cigar, MCU Press, June 2011.

MES Monographs No. 1, "The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Operational and Policy Implications," Michael Eisenstadt, MES at MCU, August 2011.

MES Occasional Papers No. 2, "Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government: Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle," Norman Cigar, MCU Press, September 2011.

MES Launches Its 2011-2012 Lecture Series

by Adam C. Seitz

The uprisings taking place throughout the Middle East and North Africa are reshaping the political and social landscape of the region. As this environment evolves, the United States Marine Corps, as the Nation's force in readiness, must stay current on the emerging realities in the Middle East to ensure they stand ready to respond to the Nation's needs. The wave of uprisings which began in December of 2010 in Tunisia, now referred to as the Arab Spring, has had varied results throughout the region and mixed responses from the international community. Not only has the rule of long-standing regimes been challenged, but also the relationships of leaders throughout the region and beyond, with flailing and deposed dictators as well as their successors, have been redefined. The situation in Libya has already led to military intervention by NATO, and although too early to predict, the deteriorating situations in Syria and Yemen may result in some degree of intervention from neighboring countries or beyond.

Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University (MES at MCU) has dedicated its 2011-2012 Lecture Series to exploring the opportunities and challenges that the Arab Spring present to the United States, the region, and the international community.

The first lecture in the Series presented by Dr. Jon Alterman, Director and Senior Fellow of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, was entitled "Seeing Through the Fog: Transitional Governments in Libya and Elsewhere." In his presentation, Dr. Alterman put forth six points to "keep in mind to help avoid making obvious mistakes and right-size expectations." His first three points addressed governmental transition in general:

1. Transitions take time to evolve.
2. The U.S. government often constrains its own role through internal divisions.
3. Neighboring states often play an outsized role influencing outcomes.

The three remaining were specifically about the governmental transition in Libya:

1. Compared to other successful oppositions, Libya's opposition is of relatively recent origin and was forged out of a brief conflict.
2. Many insurgent political movements in other countries have had a deep nationalist core while nationalism has had an uncertain quality in Libya.
3. There are large amounts of money in Libya, plus potential future stream of funds generated from oil and gas production is likely to give huge advantages to whomever can control it.

Dr. Alterman started the Lecture Series off on a strong path, providing the Marine Corps University his insights on the case of Libya. The remaining lectures in this series run through April 2012 and focus on individual countries' roles in the Arab Spring, including but not limited to the cases of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, and Yemen.

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