



# Foreign Policy Research Institute

# FOOTNOTES

Vol. 16, No. 10

The Newsletter of FPRI's Wachman Center

December 2011

## Iran's Internal Dynamics

By Amin Tarzi

*Amin Tarzi is the Director of Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia. This essay is based on his lecture at FPRI's History Institute for Teachers, Oct. 15-16, 2011, on "Teaching the Middle East: Between Authoritarianism and Reform." Videofiles and other materials from the conference are available at: <http://www.fpri.org/education/1110middleeast/>*

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-climactic.

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.<sup>1</sup>

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. 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

---

<sup>1</sup> Amin Tarzi and Adam Seitz, “Iran at a Crossroad,” *MES Insights*, Volume 1, Issue 1 (January 2010).

of economic and moral violations.<sup>2</sup> 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 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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?

#### 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.

*\*This article has been reprinted with the permission of the author from: Amin Tarzi, “Iran’s Internal Dynamics,” MES Insights, Volume 2, Issue 5 (November 2011), [www.mcu.usmc.edu/MiddleEastStudies/Documents/MES%20Insights/MES%20Insights%20Vol%202,%20Issue%205.pdf](http://www.mcu.usmc.edu/MiddleEastStudies/Documents/MES%20Insights/MES%20Insights%20Vol%202,%20Issue%205.pdf)*

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org) or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).

---

<sup>2</sup> “Sepah zabet-e dastgah-e qazayi dar barkhord ba jaryan-e enherafti ast,” Mehr News Agency, July 5, 2011, [www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsPrint.aspx?NewsID=1351670](http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsPrint.aspx?NewsID=1351670), accessed November 3, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Tarzi and Seitz, “Iran at a Crossroad.”

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