



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~

**‘HOLLOW LEADERSHIP’:  
THE IRANIAN PREDICAMENT**

**By Raz Zimmt**

*Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press. These articles will focus on providing FPRI’s readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.*

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On February 1, 2012, the Iranian authorities celebrated the 33rd anniversary of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s return from exile. They reenacted his arrival at Tehran airport by replacing the late Iranian leader with a cardboard cutout. Many Iranian bloggers, commenting on the photographs published by Iran’s official media, asserted that the cutout reflects the bleak situation of the Islamic Revolution, as well as the regime’s shift away from the founder and revolution’s values. The Iranian leadership has become hollow and all that is left from the revolution is a cardboard cutout.<sup>1</sup>

The cardboard cutout is a fitting metaphor for the Islamic Republic’s predicament. Thirty-three years ago, the Iranian regime focused on two interconnected objectives: first, to stabilize and solidify the Islamic regime and second, to use the revolutionary ideology to cure the Iranian society’s maladies and to establish a role model for other Muslim societies. The regime’s ability to present the Islamic revolution and the concept of the “rule of the religious jurispudent” (*velayat-e faqih*) as a successful model both to domestic public opinion, as well as to other Muslim societies, has faced growing challenges over the years.

Since the Islamic Revolution—and especially since the death of Khomeini in 1989—intellectuals and clerics have challenged the regime’s attempts to enforce its official interpretation for Islamic principles. Political developments in Iran during the last year have shown that the growing criticism against the regime is no longer confined to left-wing intellectuals, reformists, and dissidents.

In an interview given on January 15 by former Majles (Iranian Parliament) member to Iranian television, ‘Emad Afrough said that any Iranian citizen has the right to criticize the Supreme Leader and if the Supreme Leader is unable to provide a satisfactory response, he must be removed from office immediately.<sup>2</sup> The public outrage sparked by Afrough’s interview came after another controversy sparked by an article published by in the “*Ettela’at*” daily newspaper. In this article, written by Hossein ‘Alaei, the first commander of the Revolutionary Guards navy, the former top officer implicitly compared the current suppression of political freedoms in Iran to the situation preceding the Islamic revolution.<sup>3</sup> Following the article’s publication, ‘Alaei was criticized severely by regime’s supporters, forcing him to issue a clarification. In it he emphasized his loyalty to the regime and that his loyalty to the Supreme Leader remained unchanged.

Besides the external criticism against the Iranian regime, the political elites continue to divide between supporters of President Ahmadinejad and those of Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. This political conflict reflects more than internal power struggles; rather there is also a fierce ideological battle over the Islamic Republic’s identity. The messianic and anti-clerical views of the president’s associates (referred to by their opponents as the “deviant current”), their emphasis on the national-cultural

<sup>1</sup> <http://sogholmeh.wordpress.com/2012/02/01/hyperreal-emam>.

<sup>2</sup> *Tabnak*, January 17, 2012, <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/22046>.

<sup>3</sup> *Kalemeh*, January 9, 2012, <http://www.kaleme.com/1390/10/19/klm-86004>.

component of Iranian identity over Islam, and the challenge they represent to the clerics' status, led by the Supreme Leader, are considered significant threats by the conservative establishment. The mass vetting of candidates associated with the "deviant current" prior the parliamentary elections held on March 2 was a clear indication of the regime's determination to crush this threat.<sup>4</sup>

The regime's internal predicament has become even more strained due to growing economic problems. These have been intensified because of international sanctions imposed on Iran, and the government's misconduct. Despite the authorities' ongoing efforts to curb the sharp increase of the dollar's exchange rate against the Iranian currency, the *rial* has continued to slide against the American dollar on the free market. In addition, prices continue to soar. Figures released recently indicate that since the beginning of the current Iranian year (March 2011), food prices have doubled or even tripled, the price of clothing has gone up by at least 30 percent, transportation prices have increased by 100 percent and housing prices have risen by 10-20 percent.<sup>5</sup>

The difficulties facing the Iranian leadership involve not only its internal situation but also its regional position. The political upheaval in the Arab world since 2011 has weakened the pro-western camp and presented new opportunities for Iran to expand its regional influence. Encouraged by the increasing power of the Islamic movements, Iranian leaders have presented the so-called "Islamic awakening" as evidence of its success in spreading its revolutionary message and of its growing influence in the Muslim world. In a speech the Supreme Leader delivered at a world conference on Youth and Islamic Awakening held in January at Tehran's Milad Tower, Khamenei said that the Muslim nations' uprising against subservient dictators was a prelude to the uprising against the Zionist, arrogant, corrupt and evil network of global dictatorship and the beginning of the path to salvation and prosperity.<sup>6</sup> In an address to thousands of *Basij* members (volunteer forces of the Revolutionary Guards) in Tehran held on November 27, 2011, Khamenei stated that those who were familiar with the inspiring nature of the Islamic Revolution had been awaiting such an auspicious uprising for 30 years. The world's hegemons, he continued, had been trembling at the thought of the emergence of uprisings inspired by the Islamic Revolution. The Islamic Republic has become the main hub of the awakening movement of nations, he said.<sup>7</sup>

The upheavals in the Arab world, however, pose new challenges for the Islamic Republic and its ability to be considered a role model for the Muslim states. The prospects of replicating Iran's cleric-ruled government in other Arab countries—let alone Sunni states—are highly doubtful. Without another significant Islamic government in the region, however, Iran could gain popularity with the Arab public. While the secular pro-western regimes in the Arab world drifted farther away from their citizens, Iran has presented itself, with some success, as an alternative model of governance that challenges Western influence in the region and dares to stand up to the United States, Israel, and their allies.

The establishment of a new political order in the Arab world—characterized by an increasing role played by Islamic movements—casts doubts on Iran's ability to continue functioning as an attractive model for Arab societies. The choice facing Arab societies is no longer between a secular, pro-Western government model on one hand and an Iran-style revolutionary, anti-Western Islamic government on the other. Instead, that choice is between a Sunni religious model seemingly willing to incorporate democratic elements, and an authoritarian, Shi'ite-theocratic model ruled by clerics, where any manifestation of political resistance is brutally suppressed.

While the collapse of pro-Western regimes in several Arab states has potentially strengthened Iran's position, other developments in the Arab world have jeopardized Iranian interests. For example, the Shi'ite uprising in Bahrain has alarmed the other Arab Gulf states and deepened the distrust between Arab-Sunni states and Iran. Iranian leaders have tried to blur the religious divisions among Muslims. Khamenei has recently stated that the Islamic awakening movement makes no distinction between Shi'ites and Sunnis and that despite their geographic, historic, and social differences, Muslim nations are united in their struggle against the diabolical control of the Zionists and the Americans.<sup>8</sup> Such declarations have not succeeded, however, to calm Arab concerns over Iranian involvement with the Shi'ite population in the Persian Gulf and the Arab Peninsula.

The uprising in Syria, Iran's most important strategic partner in the Arab world, poses an even greater challenge to Iran's regional position. The continued weakening, let alone possible downfall, of Bashar Assad's regime may undermine the unity of the "resistance alliance" led by Tehran. A possible indication of the Syrian uprising's influence on the coherence of the "resistance camp" can already be seen in a recent speech delivered by Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah. This

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<sup>4</sup> According to a top conservative politician, over 600 candidates associated with the "deviant current" were disqualified by the "Guardian Council" prior the elections, *Mehr News Agency*, February 25, 2012, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1543471>.

<sup>5</sup> *Mehr News Agency*, February 14, 2012, [www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=1533354](http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=1533354).

<sup>6</sup> <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=18871>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=18087>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=18871>.

speech commemorated the anniversary of the birth of Prophet Mohammad. Concerning Hezbollah's relations with Iran, Nasrallah denied that Iran dictates Hezbollah's policies or interferes in its decisions. Furthermore, he said that if Israel attacks Iranian nuclear facilities, Hezbollah will be the one to decide whether to respond on Iran's behalf.<sup>9</sup> It seems that even Iran's most staunch ally is no longer as committed as it once was.

Iran is well aware of the risks posed by the developments in the Arab world. A report concerning the effect of the events in the Arab world on the Islamic Republic, released by the *Majles* Research Center in April 2011, asserted that the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa create threats as well as opportunities for Iran. The center warned that the developments in the Arab world may have severe consequences for Iran's national security unless it adopts a well thought-out strategy towards the regional upheavals.<sup>10</sup>

The Iranian press also expressed its concerns over Iran's regional position, particularly in light of Turkey's political initiatives. In September 2011, the Iranian Diplomacy website argued that Iran's influence on the events in the Arab world remains limited while Turkey is putting considerable efforts into strengthening its position as a regional leader and using its influence to establish a political order.<sup>11</sup>

The internal developments in Iran, as well as the uprisings in the Arab world, are likely to pose further constraints on Iran's ability to advance its aspirations. In the short term, the Iranian leadership may be able to eliminate any threat to its stability and take advantage of new opportunities to increase its regional influence. Its problems may even increase by defying the global consensus on its nuclear policy and its willingness to resort to terror in order to tackle the pressures it faces. In the medium and long terms, however, Iran may find it more difficult to realize its ambitions. The international community should consider Iran's predicament as an opportunity to increase the pressure on this regime. Should it not succeed in changing Iran's nuclear policy, it may finally improve the chances for regime change.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.yalibnan.com/2012/02/07/nasrallah-iran-wont-ask-hezbollah-to-intervene-if-attacked-by-israel>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/789029>.

<sup>11</sup> Iranian Diplomacy, 18 September, 2011, <http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/58/bodyView/16337>.