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## **Assessment Report**

*Iran: A conflict over authority,  
or a dispute over responsibilities?*

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***Assessment Report***

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The refusal of Iran's supreme leader Sayed Ali Khamenei to accept the resignation of State Intelligence Minister Haidar Moslhei, in contradiction to the wishes of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is a new milestone in the tense relations between the two most powerful branches of government in Iran. President Ahmadinejad had, reportedly, personally asked the minister to resign.

The quasi-official Fars news agency had earlier announced, on April 18, Ahmadinejad's acceptance of Moslhei's resignation and his re-appointment as a presidential adviser on intelligence affairs. It was only a few hours later that other news sources, generally accepted to be close to the supreme leader, published Khamenei's refusal to accept the president's decision. Within two days, Khamenei's official media had confirmed the story, which was followed by the Iranian legislature joining together to demand that Ahmadinejad rescind his earlier decision, and support Moslhei in his capacity as minister.

Ahmadinejad's response was to boycott all governmental activities for ten days, choosing to isolate himself at his home whence he refused to receive emissaries sent by Khamenei. A growing conflict between supporters of Khamenei and those who backed Ahmadinejad seemed to escalate in Iran, with numerous personalities trading insults and accusations, with some websites belonging to the president's supporters being shut down. The cleric Ayatollah Mohammed Khatami and the scholar Taqi Musbah Yazdi went so far as to give a speech comparing disrespect for the rulings of the supreme leader with apostasy; others were quick to demand that Ahmadinejad repent for his sins against the ruling religious authority of the Islamic Republic. Faced with such a situation, Ahmadinejad was compelled to back down, and openly state his loyalty to the supreme leader of the Islamic Revolution and support of the leader's decisions, all the while making clear that he would fully explain his reasons for boycotting government meetings at a more appropriate time.

While events may seem to have reached a climax, the unraveling of events is far from over. An important point to keep in mind is that these incidents took place towards the end of Ahmadinejad's presidential term, in some of the most crucial components of the Iranian governmental system among a group of the Iranian regime which had previously been thought to be of one mind. A number of questions are raised by the act of the supreme leader re-affirming Moslhei in his role as state Intelligence Minister. Some question whether there is an internal power struggle between opposing camps seeking influence within the regime. Others suggest that it is simply a political misunderstanding within a group who share an outlook and whose positions are firmly shared, while a third group points to a structural ambiguity in the way decisions are made in the heart of the Islamic Republic.

In this report, we will aim to clarify these issues by examining three axes:

- 1) The political and constitutional roots of the conflict
- 2) Ahmadinejad, the responsibilities of the President and the role of the Leader
- 3) Possible outcomes

### **Political and constitutional roots of the conflict**

The opposition of the supreme leader to the dismissal of a cabinet minister is an unprecedented event in post-revolutionary Iran. It should be noted that there is a constitutional confusion around this matter: while Article 135 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic gives the president the authority to refuse or accept ministerial resignations, Article 136 allows the supreme leader the right to dismiss ministers from power.

Yet the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, through the *Vilayet-e-Faqih* [rule of the jurist] system of rule by theocracy, gives the supreme leader overarching powers to intervene in all spiritual and temporal affairs on the premise that his role will be to protect the revolution and the nation. Article 57 of the constitution goes on to state: “The branches of government which rule in the Islamic Republic of Iran are the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches, each of which enjoys autonomy from the others, but all of them together are subject to the oversight of the Guardian of the country and Imam of the nation [embodied in the person of the supreme leader], according to the subsequent articles in this constitution.” This complete authority which is described as couched in the language of theocracy suggests that the orders of the supreme leader are irrefutable religious diktats which cannot be violated, a point seized on by Khamenei's supporters who accused the president of hesitation in obeying the supreme leader's commands. On the other hand, Ahmadinejad's group viewed the supreme leader's views on the intelligence minister as opinions which were open to discussion.

A broadly comparable case developed in 1987, when the founder of the Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, allowed for the implementation of new labor legislation before it had been through all of the relevant legislative channels. At that time, the Chamber of Deputies [roughly equivalent to the lower house of parliament] had amended the bill eight times in order that it might be approved by the Council for the Protection of the Constitution, who had resisted on the grounds that the bill was un-Islamic. Khomeini, in his capacity as supreme leader, however, had given the minister of labor his support to implement the new law. The president of the Republic at the time, who had been opposed to this move on the part of the then-supreme leader, was Ali Khamenei. The minister of labor in those days had taken the chance provided by Khomeini's blessing to enact a number of laws which had been similarly held up, enraging President Khamenei, who condemned this encroachment by the Ministry of Labor in a Friday sermon delivered on New Year's Eve, 1987-1988. This action then led the Ayatollah Khomeini to publish a rebuke in the form of a letter which set out his vision for total loyalty to the religious leader within the *Vilayet-e-Faqih* system. While this sketch provides something of a historical background to the constitutional crisis within Iran, the circumstances surrounding the rise of Ahmadinejad to power, and his actions over the past six years, serve to further illuminate the context.

Observers of the Iranian situation before 2005 clearly saw that the supreme leader Ali Khamenei was in need of somebody like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to take up space within the political arena: Ahmadinejad was the right candidate to confront the nebulous group of political reformists, to entrench political conservatives within the machinery of power, and to return to a more confrontational approach to the Republic's enemies abroad. These considerations did not cause all the disagreements to evaporate, but

they did drive the supreme leader to openly side with Ahmadinejad during the 2009 elections, proving that, in Khamenei's view, there was a right time for everything. Khamenei might have supported Ahmadinejad's bid for the presidency, but this should not be taken to mean full support for the president's mode of operation: the hemorrhaging of staff from the president's cabinet, a development unseen before in Iranian politics, was seen by the opposition to be a waste of talent and a disruption to governmental work. They also unsettled the supreme leader.

Since coming to power in 2005, Ahmadinejad had successfully dismissed 12 ministers, the latest one being former Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in December of 2010, while the latter was on state business outside the country. Mottaki had risen to prominence with the blessing of Khamenei, who had delivered a speech praising his efforts only a short while before he was dismissed from his position as foreign minister. As a result, many viewed the Mottaki debacle as a confrontation between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei, forcing the supreme leader's hand and compelling him to assert his authority over the presidency, and making this clear to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

When it comes to the foreign dimension of the crisis, the two sides have a very clear divergence over several regional issues, particularly when it comes to how to make the most of the revolutionary movements pushing through the Arab countries. The supreme leader's supporters were not entirely pleased with the pace of resumption of diplomatic ties with Egypt, while Ahmadinejad's group saw the recent uprising in Egypt as an opportunity to build a strong alliance of like-minded countries across the region.

The steps Ahmadinejad took before his firing of Mottaki, such as the appointment of new individuals to take up diplomatic postings in various parts of Asia and the Middle East, indicate a new approach to world affairs within the Iranian presidency. There remains no doubt, however, that the final say, when it comes to the international relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran, rests in the hands of the supreme leader Ali Khamenei, with the president having only a figurehead role with responsibilities for carrying out the state's policies.

Another bone of contention between the two sides to the conflict lies in a more purely religious matter, the millenarian beliefs of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Upon the president's return from the US, where he delivered a speech before the United Nations General Assembly shortly after his first election as President in 2001, Ahmadinejad declared before the supreme leader that he had been seen to have a halo of light surrounding his head while speaking before the UN member states' delegates. Although these statements drew a great deal of scorn in Iran, Ahmadinejad continued for years to state that the Awaited Mahdi [Messiah],<sup>1</sup> the Twelfth Imam of the Shi'ite Muslims whom they believe to be in divine seclusion until it is time for the world to end, was a full supporter of his governmental platform.

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<sup>1</sup> Imam Mahdi Muhammad, son of Hasan al-Askari, is the twelfth Imam of a series of infallible imams appointed by God. Shiites believe that the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam was secretly born in 255 AH, and went into occultation after his father al-Askari passed away in 260 AH, in Samarra

Khamenei, as supreme leader, was not entirely pleased by the populist statements made by Ahmadinejad, which he came to see as bombastic words from somebody who had no business dealing with these affairs. Khamenei sees himself as the sole appointed agent of the awaited Mahdi on Earth, a point which he made clear in a speech during 2008: “People need not believe any claims to be in direct communication with the Holy Awaited Imam, [sic] these claims are false.” Ahmadinejad is also a proponent of the idea of “Iranian Islam,” a worldview which tries to blend in aspects both of Twelver Shi’ite Islam and the pre-Islamic Persian culture of Iran, and which the supreme leader and his coterie distrust, sensing in it a possible threat to the Islamic nature of the state.

All of these disputes played a role in deepening the chasm between these two men, as did their differences over a number of internal Iranian issues. Take, for example, Ahmadinejad’s acceptance of the presence of women at sporting stadia, and his relatively lenient approach to the wearing of the hijab in streets and public spaces. There was also the point of Ahmadinejad’s relationship with his former deputy, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei,<sup>2</sup> who many in the supreme leader’s camp blame for the deterioration in the relationship between these two seats of power. While Ahmadinejad has come to publicly praise Mashaei on numerous occasions, referring to him as “exceptional, uncorrupted, loyal and well-informed possessing a deep intellectual vision,” many in the supreme leaders grouping view the man as an ideological deviant who peddles unsound ideas with regards to the awaited Mahdi and who represents a serious risk to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

What all of the above demonstrates is that the dispute between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei is rooted in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, and that the nature of the relationship between these two men took shape as soon as the president came to power.

### **Ahmadinejad: responsibilities of the president, role of the leader**

The commonly accepted of the relationship between Ahmadinejad with Khamenei was one of the former being the latter’s dutiful son, with the two of them belonging to a broadly similar school of thought. It became clear that Ahmadinejad would not have been able to survive the doubts surrounding his 2009 presidential election without the support of Khamenei; these images allowed many who were unaware of the internal strife to see a perfect harmony between the president and the supreme leader.

**Ahmadinejad’s impasse with the religious leader of the Republic** Iran specialists believe that the regime structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran carries within it an internal contradiction between the sovereignty of the nation and the rule of the theological guardian who has overall responsibility for the

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<sup>2</sup> Born in 1960, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei graduated in electronic engineering, and has been promoted within the *Basij* paramilitaries since his early youth. He played a crucial role in the military intelligence apparatus before being involved in culture. He is an old friend of Ahmadinejad before he became his in-law. After his election as president in 2009, Ahmadinejad appointed him as his deputy, but Khamenei rejected this appointment. Ahmadinejad selected him later as his office director. Mashaei resigned his post beginning April 2011.

welfare of the public. This internal contradiction is played out in numerous venues, whether those councils elected by the people or in other arenas. They also point out that any candidate for the presidency needs to be approved by the supreme leader, who also has the authority to recognize, or otherwise endorse, the results of the elections. It is this internal contradiction which is playing out today in Iranian politics; it is but an extension of the dialectical debate between two sides of a political and theological battle about the role of Twelver Shi'ism in the realm of politics, where the theological purists insist that there should be a role for a jurists who will look after temporal affairs until the awaited Mahdi is ready to appear. Another, revisionist school of thought, believes, instead, that the supreme leader should focus solely on the spiritual affairs of the people, leaving politics to the politicians until the Mahdi can appear; anything else, in their view, is encroachment on what are otherwise the divinely guarded rights of the Mahdi to lead the people. It becomes evident that the question of contrast between the people's authority and that of the jurist is rooted in Iranian religious and political thought. It is only by bearing all of these factors in mind that we can fully understand the stand-off between the president and the supreme leader.

Ahmadinejad attempted to overcome these issues through his declaration of loyalty to the supreme leader, in keeping with the traditions of the Islamic Republic. Yet he also wanted to fully exercise his rights as an elected president, not to mention as a world leader with a following on the global arena. Ahmadinejad came to power with a determination to return the Islamic Revolution to its true path, which, in his view, had been set off course by the reformists. Conservative political movement thus spares no effort to remove reformists from positions of authority and decision-making within the government. At the same time, Iranian jails were filled with the activists of the reform movement, including a number of high-ranking figures of the Khatami presidency and journalists sympathetic to Khatami; among these were Khatami's deputy president Mohammed Ali Abtahi and Khatami government's spokesman, as well as a number of his cabinet ministers, intellectuals, and journalists.

On the economy, Ahmadinejad went on to implement a number of changes in an effort to meet his promises to Iran's poor on the sharing of oil revenues. These included austerity measures which lifted government subsidies for petrol and gas products, as well as consumption goods. On the international relations front, Ahmadinejad re-introduced the firmness of Iranian positions, especially when it came to the nuclear weapons issue and the confrontation with Israel, as well as trying to regain Iran's traditional regional leadership. In Ahmadinejad's opinion, these measures and positions were successes which were only possible with the support of the awaited Mahdi; it was only through following this path that Iran could regain its position of prominence on the world stage, after the risk of drifting away into insignificance because of reformist policies.

Ahmadinejad's view of himself as a strong and inspired leader becomes present in the speeches which he delivers before the United Nations General Assembly, in which he emphasizes the proselytizing message of the Iranian revolution, which can be taken together with his other statements related to the support which his government and program receives from the awaited Mahdi. This feeling of strong leadership is what informs his actions within some of the most important pillars of the state, including the foreign and intelligence ministries. Ahmadinejad's desire to be seen as a strong leader, both at home and abroad, has



earned him the wrath of the reformist camp, whom he tried to sideline from the political scene in Iran. It also resulted in his being distrusted by the clerical establishment due to incidents where Ahmadinejad appears to be in defiance of the supreme leader, appearing to be in competition with him.

### **Conclusions: Future Horizons**

Despite the televised remarks of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, where he proclaimed that relations between him and the supreme leader remain cordial, events which unfolded in May of 2011 indicate that the crisis between two camps, more so than that between two individuals, remains unresolved, and is in fact likely to escalate. As previously stated, Ahmadinejad took the exceptional step of secluding himself at home, hesitating to implement the instructions of the supreme leader. Clerics within the Khamenei camp used this time to level accusations of disloyalty at Ahmadinejad, and many called for him to make a public penance and show of commitment to Khamenei; some within the clerical establishment, who had some of their websites shut down, went so far as to suggest that Ahmadinejad's camp is deviant and corrupt, calling the supreme leader to take a clear stance on that.

These threats were brought into action when *Hujjat al Islam* [another religious honorific title, lesser ranking than an Ayatollah] Abbas Amiri-Far, the secretary general of the society of preachers, head of the presidential cultural council and a close associate of Ahmadinejad and Meshaei, who had been named as a contender for the post of the new intelligence minister, was arrested. An administrative court had also ordered that Ahmadinejad's executive advisor and director of free trade zones, Ahmad Baqaei, be stripped of his position and barred from public service for four years, for bureaucratic inconsistencies during his time as the chief of the Antiquities and Tourism Authority. Another arrest came for Parivash Satvati, wife of Mossadeq-era Foreign Minister Hussein Fatimi, widely regarded as an Ahmadinejad supporter and a confidante of Meshaei.

It seems that Ahmadinejad has delayed coming out with a strong statement on his views of what his supporters are being subjected to by the supreme leader's camp. At the same time, the president remained steadfast in his desire to implement his reforms, which irked conservatives and provoked their opposition: namely the dismissal of three ministers in a bid to merge the ministries, the delay in giving his assent to the formation of a Ministry for Sports and Youth, and his handling of the Ministry of Oil at the time of Iran's presidency of OPEC as he dismissed the appointed minister then. All of these had earned Mahmoud Ahmadinejad more enemies. These developments placed the president of the Republic, and his government performance, deeper into question, with inquiry into the future of the relation between the president, on the one hand, and the supreme leader and the institutions which are loyal to him, on the other, namely the Parliament, the Expediency Discernment Council of the System, the Council of Experts, as well as a group of jurists.

Attempts to understand the schism between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei have led some to postulate on the role ideology played in this dispute. Was it a motivation for conflict, or merely a tool used by one side against the other? Do Ahmadinejad's positions and roles enjoy a kind of justification, based on a given reading of history? Many point to Ahmadinejad's populist reading of history and religion, a message of

salvation and simplicity, as opposed to the institutional, specialized and judicial role played by the supreme leader. At any rate, Ahmadinejad will have to find something to contain him and his political ambitions as soon as he leaves the Presidency; he will have to find a vehicle for what some are calling “Ahmadinejadism”.

In this sense, Khamenei's role is traditional, set aside for the supreme leader, one of arbitrator between competing political trends within the Iranian regime, ensuring that no one political bloc or individual politician can rise to undue prominence; this also ensures the centrality of the supreme leader within the realm of *Vilayet-e-Faqih* [the rule of the jurist]. Of course, none of this has put a stop to demands that the historical, bureaucratic, and functional role of the supreme leader be re-examined in the context of the Islamic republic regime. It is now crunch time for Ahmadinejad: Is the president now a lame duck, politically? Is there a way to extract the Islamic Republic from this quagmire, peaceably? What will become now of the reform movement, who stand to gain from this stand-off? Finally, how will Mahmoud Ahmadinejad react to the marginalization of those figures who were his biggest political supporters?

**First Possible Outcome:** The possibility of Khamenei ousting the President becomes a tangible reality at this stage, leading to early presidential elections. This measure might be a way out of the political predicament. Yet most observers agree that the possibility of this happening is slim, given that the presidential elections are scheduled to be held very soon and the repercussions such a step could have for Iran both internally and abroad in a critical period of the region history.

**Second Possible Outcome:** A second possibility is that decisions on this matter will be postponed to see the two sides of the conflict uniting to face the common foreign enemy. One of the very worrying developments for all concerned parties within the Iranian regime is the way events are unfolding in Syria, which could see the country one of its main allies in the region. This could also imply that Iran will seek to escalate the level of agitation in Bahrain which may restore balance to the forces in accordance with the principle of mutual pressure.

**Third Possible Outcome:** Some expect that Ahmadinejad may seek to remain a political player even after the coming presidential elections, for which he is not entitled to run, by nominating his in-law, Rahim Mashaei, yet Ahmadinejad's modest accomplishments during his years in office, in addition to many of the other problems which he faces, cast him as the weak president at the end of his term and little else. This reality will affect the chances of his camp in any democratic elections, especially given the accusations of administrative and economic corruption on the part of many of those close to him. Perhaps a sure-fire way of ensuring the end of the rule of Ahmadinejad and his coterie will be to gradually continue purging his supporters from positions of governmental authority, until presidential elections are held and the job can be finished off. In such a scenario, the role played by the military establishment will be crucial.

One possible course of action for the supreme leader is to make way for a new alternative actor who would combine reformism with loyalty to the supreme leader and his commands to take shape and assume some power, provided that such figures could be found who do not have strong links to the traditional

“reformists” in terms of their activities and positions in contravention of the conservatives within the regime. Sources knowledgeable of Ahmadinejad point out that he is not usually the type of person who holds back from voicing his criticism or reacting to changes on the ground; but, will Ahmadinejad now, after all these developments, continue to cross the lines drawn in the sand by Ali Khamenei? In other words, will the coming volley between the two sides answer the fundamental question: is there a conflict over authority or is it a question of a dispute over duties and responsibilities?

It is our considered opinion that the dispute is more of a dispute about responsibilities, and that Khamenei's supporters want to ensure the supreme leader's prestige and power is not diminished.