

Khamenei Seeks Rehabilitation in Qom

Geneive Abdo and Arash Aramesh

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While the Iranian regime appears to be finding support these days in Shiite quarters from Beirut to Baghdad, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is searching for theological backing this week in his own backyard.

Khamenei began on Tuesday an unprecedented, nine-day trip to Qom, the holy city that is the center for Shiite learning. The objective of his journey is to seek assurances of loyalty, after more than a year of harsh criticism, not only coming from dissident clerics and seminarians but religious scholars who were once staunch supporters of the Islamic republic.

Now, a number of Grand Ayatollahs openly criticize Iran's leadership for its handling of the disputed 2009 presidential election and for imposing a campaign of repression against the Iranian population. The violence committed by the security forces, with Khamenei's implicit backing, has led many religious scholars to declare Khamenei unfit to lead an Islamic state.

Less than a month ago, the respected Grand Ayatollah Ali-Mohammad Dastgheib struck a blow to Khamenei's authority. When Dastgheib was asked by a follower about the legitimacy of the Vali Faqih, or guardian jurist, and the way it is currently implemented, he issued a provocative response, questioning Khamenei's authority and opposing the concentration of power in one man. In his lengthy written response, the Grand Ayatollah from Shiraz argued that the Vali Faqih must have a "special place in people's hearts and minds," something Dastgheib implied Khamenei lacks.

Khamenei is also the target of the turbaned class because of his unwavering support in 2009 for the re-election of President Ahmadinejad; Khamenei was highly instrumental in returning Ahmadinejad to power. According to Ataollah Mohajerani, a reformist-oriented former minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance now living in London, only two of Qom's twelve Grand Ayatollahs openly support Ahmadinejad's administration.

Qom's lack of subordination is a threat to Khamenei's rule and to the long-term survival of the Islamic Republic -- a system which prides itself with fusing (at least in

theory) Islamic values and a republican form of governance. Since June of 2009, Iranians have called into question Iran's claim to being either a republic or an Islamic state. And if the religious establishment, which many Iranians still respect, echoes the views of disillusioned Iranians, Khamenei risks becoming a mere figurehead of an Islamic revolution gone awry. Although Khamenei has had a credibility problem since he was appointed Leader in 1989, now critics are no longer fearful of publicly condemning his rule.

During his trip to Qom, Khamenei gave a fiery speech at Qom's Astaneh Square in which he called his enemies "microbes" and said the events following the June 12 election "vaccinated" the Islamic republic against these microbes. He emphasized the role of popular support for the Islamic republic and said the "revolution was supported by the people" and warned about the enemy's plan to create a cleavage between the people and Shiite clerics.

The Supreme Leader then claimed that sanctions have had no real impact on people's lives in Iran. He said the enemy has two main objectives: damaging people's faith and weakening their loyalty to the government. Khamenei once again supported the government of President Ahmadinejad and criticized those who intentionally turned a blind eye to the services of the current government. After his speech, Khamenei went on to pay his respects to the holy shrine of Masoumeh, a Shiite holy shrine in Qom, and to meet with a number of senior clerics and administrators of Qom's seminaries. Major Sources of Emulation were not present at this meeting, but a pro-government news agency reported that they will meet with the Leader later this week.

In addition to speaking to carefully coordinated crowds, his nine-day trip includes holding an audience with Qom's seminary students, teachers, local residents, and foreign students. But his most important meetings will be on Saturday and Sunday when he meets with senior clerics, including a number of Grand Ayatollahs.

Ahead of his trip to Qom, Khamenei's loyalists engaged in a bit of advance public relations. Ali Larijani, the conservative speaker of parliament, jumped to Khamenei's support when, forty-eight hours before Khamenei's "historic" visit to Qom, a reporter asked Larijani whether this visit would be successful in diffusing the enemy's plan to show a rift between Khamenei and senior clerics. Larijani responded, "There is no cleavage between the leader and the Sources of Emulation." He also said that "Velayat Faqih is the fruit of the tree of Sources of Emulation." But then he went on to attack those with impure thoughts who consider themselves believers of the faith and followers of the great Sources of Emulation, yet claim not to believe in Velayat Faqih.

In addition, hardliner cleric Ahmad Khatami announced that, according to the Leader's expressed wishes, a number of new "religious think-tanks" will be created in Qom. While praising Khamenei's exceptional knowledge of jurisprudential matters, Khatami said these "religious think-tanks" will produce new analysis, thought, and research and "only when the environment becomes right, these [religious teachings] will be effective," setting the stage for funneling enormous sums of money to create centers of thought beholden to Khamenei.

Clearly, Khamenei understands the difficulties he is facing. For one thing, the regime has employed a well-orchestrated propaganda machine to promote Khamenei as the most knowledgeable and the most eligible Source of Emulation. At times, his supporters call him Imam, a title that was reserved only for Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Preachers and prayer leaders throughout the country are paid to promote the Leader as the "aslah" or the best fit to lead, something that was rarely witnessed, or necessary, during the reign of Khomeini whose legitimacy went largely unchecked. Last Friday, it was Tehran's prayer leader who broke the "good news" of Khamenei's trip to Qom and predicted a "glorious visit"

Prayer leaders and preachers are not the only ones doing the heavy lifting. Every media outlet in Iran has dedicated time and resources to promote Khamenei's visit and to urge the masses to turn up on the streets of Qom to welcome the leader. IRNA, the Islamic Republic's News Agency, has created a separate page committed to promoting and covering this visit. IRIB, Islamic Republic of Iran's Broadcasting simply known as Iran's radio and television, is airing images of Khamenei around the clock. Fars, a semi-official news agency with ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, even went as far as to forecast that the residents of Qom will create "another epic turnout" similar to pro-government demonstrations last year.

During Khamenei's visit to Qom, a number of new development projects, including schools, roads, factories, and water plants, to name a few will be launched to bring much needed investment to the desert city. Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi, a conservative cleric who has been at odds with the government of President Ahmadinejad, said on Sunday that, "His [Khamenei's] trip to Qom will bring many blessings to the city" and urged the people of Qom to show their appreciation by welcoming the leader to the city.

Time will tell if Khamenei's orchestrated trip to Qom inspires enough support to alter his legacy.

The road to Tehran runs through Ankara

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Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in recent days met with dignitaries at the United Nations to generate international support for Iran to engage in talks with the United States and other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council over Iran's nuclear program. But when Mottaki and other Iranian officials in Tehran have talked recently about restarting talks, they are not referring to the nuclear negotiations the Europeans and the United States are hoping for; rather, they are trying to gain traction on negotiations about the Tehran Declaration, the agreement brokered between Iran, Brazil and Turkey in May, which is limited to a swap deal over a portion of Iran's enriched uranium. This is the deal the United States, Britain, and France dismissed in May as a sideshow and a manipulative tactic by Iran to get out of tough sanctions, shortly before crippling sanctions were passed in the United Nations, the European Union, and the U.S. Congress. At the time, this action prompted a hostile reaction from Iran.

Now that Mottaki is placing the deal squarely on the table again, the Obama administration should seize the moment. Rather than pursue talks over Iran's broader nuclear program and risk failure -- during a period when there appears to be little time to waste before either a military attack is launched against Iran or Iran develops the technology to produce a nuclear weapon -- a wiser move would be to talk with Iran first over the Tehran Declaration as a way of building trust.

This is certainly the view of the Turks. A delegation of Turkish parliamentarians was in Washington last week for meetings with the Obama administration over Ankara's relations with Iran, Israel and other issues. The delegation likely advised the United States to take Iran up on its offer to begin talks immediately over the Tehran Declaration. At least one other Turkish delegation visited Washington this past summer, delivering this same message. But their efforts produced little more than hostility from members of Congress and less than enthusiastic responses from officials in the administration.

In interviews I had in Turkey during a recent trip there, Turkish diplomats who spent months shuttling between Ankara and Tehran last spring to broker the Tehran Declaration told me that the United States should accept Iran's offer to make the Tehran Declaration the framework of any negotiations with the five-plus-one because there is no support in Tehran now to negotiate over Iran's broader nuclear program. This might be what the United States wants, but there is no backing for it among a

cross-section of Iran's political elites. "The inner circle around [Supreme Leader Ali] Khamenei views this Tehran agreement as a first step to establish good faith with Western governments," said one Turkish official with first-hand knowledge of the talks with Iran.

Iran's new campaign to revive the Tehran Declaration extends from New York to Tehran. On Sept. 28, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast reiterated Iran's position: "We have repeatedly said that we are ready for talks with Vienna Group based on [the] Tehran Declaration and we are continuing consultation to specify details of the negotiation as well as its place and time."

Turkish officials have stated repeatedly -- both last week during their Washington visit and in the summer -- that Turkey wants to facilitate the negotiations with Iran and the five-plus-one. Indeed, as the arbiter Turkey would likely ensure success. By now, Turkish negotiators understand the internal politics inside the Iranian regime far better than their European or American counterparts do. The many months Turkish foreign ministry officials shuttled between Tehran and Ankara were instructive: "It was a good lesson in how to build a consensus with different political actors," one Turkish foreign ministry official told me who participated in the delegation.

The Turks believe that negotiations first over the fuel swap deal -- even though it falls far short of the demands of the five-plus-one -- will lead the inner circle around Khamenei and the supreme leader himself to compromise over other issues of concern to the West, such as Iran enriching uranium at 20 percent, which the Obama administration adamantly opposes because it could allow Iran to eventually produce a nuclear weapon.

The United States should listen to the Turks, simply because there are no other options to begin a dialogue with Iran. At this point, we do not need any more negotiations with Iran to understand that Western states cannot effectively talk to the Iranians alone. Talks between the five-plus-one with Iran, with Turkey as the arbiter, are a positive path out of the deadlock.

Geneive Abdo is the Director of the Iran program at The Century Foundation and creator of <http://www.insideiran.org>.

The Widening Rift Among Iran's Clerics

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By **GENEIVE ABDO** and **ARASH ARAMESH**

Just a few years ago, it was rare to hear public declarations from Ayatollah Ali Khamenei claiming vast authority as a theologian. But today it is unusual if a few weeks go by without a public pronouncement from him boasting of his Islamic credentials.

Recently, Khamenei issued a fatwa on his Web site, demanding that Shiites obey him as the ultimate spiritual leader on earth. In his words, Khamenei said he was the earthly “deputy” of both the Prophet Mohammad and the Hidden Imam, who is the 12th imam Shiites believe will return to earth one day to save the world.

There is a purpose behind Khamenei’s increasing public attempts to assert his self-proclaimed religious authority. As the supreme leader feels more and more threatened by Iran’s clerical establishment — which is increasingly challenging his ability to lead an Islamic state, particularly in the aftermath of the June 2009 presidential election — he becomes more abrasive and outspoken in an attempt to assert his questionable religious credentials. His fatwa two weeks ago, for example, constitutes heresy in the view of some theologians who believe no one can claim to represent the Prophet on earth.

In fact, there is now a full-blown rift between Khamenei and many of the conservative and traditional clerics who once supported him, or at the very least, did not publicly oppose him. Many prominent clerics are at odds with Iran’s leadership — a development that casts a question mark over the legitimacy of the Islamic state.

This conflict between the state and clerics is different now than in the past because it has been exacerbated by clerical opposition to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is Khamenei’s protégé. While in the past the conflict was primarily between well-known dissident clerics, such as the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, and hard-liners in the regime, today moderate and conservative clerics have joined the opposition. This deepening dissent illustrates the depth of Iran’s domestic crisis.

Because it is taboo in Shiite Islam to publicly criticize the supreme leader, often the grievances against Khamenei are directed at Ahmadinejad, who Khamenei has supported at a high cost.

Consider the evidence, which began nearly as soon as Khamenei declared Ahmadinejad the winner of the June 12, 2009, disputed presidential election. Senior clerics in the holy Shiite city of Qum refused to congratulate Ahmadinejad on his controversial victory. No grand ayatollah except Hussein Nouri Hamedani, who is celebrated by the central government for his wholehearted support of the leader and the president, congratulated Ahmadinejad. This was unprecedented in the Islamic Republic. In every presidential election since 1980, including those of the impeached Abolhassan Bani-Sadr and the reformist Mohammad Khatami, senior clergy in Iran publicly congratulated the winner and wished him well.

About a month ago, well-organized government supporters attacked the homes of Grand Ayatollahs Yousef Sanei and the late Hossein Ali Montazeri — both noted reformist clerics. In a show of force, mobs destroyed Sanei's office as they chanted "death to anyone opposed to velayat-e-faqih" — the "Guardianship of the Jurist," which places a leader interpreting God's word atop republican institutions.

Pro-government mobs have not spared the grandson of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic republic. At an event in June commemorating the 21st anniversary of Khomeini's death, supporters of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad interrupted Hassan Khomeini's speech, called him a hypocrite, and forced him to leave the stage.

The fact that the government felt compelled to treat the grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini and two grand ayatollahs as enemies of the state shows how worried the regime is about its religious authority. It is likely that further humiliation will be directed at other dissident clerics.

The new conflict between Khamenei and conservative clerics is not about the legitimacy of the theory of velayat-e-faqih — these clerics believe in that concept. It is about how Khamenei has reached far beyond the powers he is entitled to as supreme leader.

In fact, a large segment of the clerical population does not believe in the theory of velayat-e-faqih and thinks the clergy should stay away from politics. One such cleric is the most notable figure in the Shiite world, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, who has many Iranian followers as well. Sistani, along with Ayatollah Hossein Kazemini-Boroujerdi in Iran, for example, is an adamant supporter of the separation of mosque and state. Boroujerdi, who is currently serving a sentence in Tehran's notorious Evin prison for his beliefs, thinks that Shiite clerics should not be involved in government.

Although the conflict between Khamenei and the clerics has become a major cause of Iran's internal crisis, it is often overlooked or misunderstood in the West. The enormous power and influence of the Shiite clergy in Iran is often underestimated because Western governments are focused on Iran's ability to acquire a nuclear weapon.

Another reason Westerners tend to discount the clerics is due to a perception that Iranians are becoming more secular. This notion is an oversimplification. After 31 years of theocratic rule, there is an increasing tendency in Iran to separate mosque and state. But this does not mean that faith in God and Shiite Islam are evaporating. Religious institutions and symbols are still important to Iranian life.

Khamenei is now facing a unique set of challenges. Conservative clerics, some of whom stand at odds with Ahmadinejad, still enjoy a strong following in Iran. In addition, Khamenei knows his power is not what it was five years ago or on June 11, 2009. The clerical establishment now has the potential to directly challenge Khamenei, which the regime wants to avoid at any cost. Recent attacks against the houses of Montazeri and Sanei made even some senior clerics who are at odds with the reformist clergy angry. They wonder what stops the government from attacking their own homes.

Khamenei's success is the result of his ability to forge alliances with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, some clerics, and traditional conservatives. Although his ties to hard-liners and the Revolutionary Guards may seem stronger today, he still needs the support of the clerical establishment.

Khamenei's idea of the Islamic Republic is certainly less republican and not necessarily more Islamic. With republican institutions in Tehran weakened and his religious authority challenged in Qum, the future of the Islamic Republic and the fate of velayat-e-faqih remain uncertain.

Geneive Abdo is the director of the Iran program at The Century Foundation. Arash Aramesh is a research associate for the Iran program.