



## Spotlight on Iran



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### **The Committee for the Protection of Iranian Interests: obstructionist camp formed vis-à-vis Rowhani**

After the Iranian president returned from the UN assembly convention, he was received by a group of students who demonstrated against him, some of whom even hurled eggs and shoes at his convoy. The responsibility for organizing the protest was assumed by the Committee for the Protection of Iranian Interests, which has recently launched a campaign against the Iran-US rapprochement.

The committee members convened a press conference last week, in which they expressed their staunch resistance to any negotiations with the USA and declared their intention to continue the protests against the president's political initiative. Upon the beginning of their activity, the committee members launched a website hosting articles, memorandums of opinion, and reports about the committee's activity.

Initial review of the committee's make-up reveals that its members are active at the students' Basij and were formerly involved in activities by radical student groups. The committee's two primary activists are affiliated with Saeed Jalili, who until recently served as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, and whose candidacy in the most recent elections was supported by the Steadfastness Front.

At this stage it seems that the activity of the Committee for the Protection of Iranian Interests mainly expresses the stance of radical right elements. As long as Rowhani has the backing of the upper echelons of the regime, and most importantly, the support of the Supreme Leader, it is doubtful whether such activity can significantly reduce his leeway. The organizational infrastructure formed by his opponents may, however, be used in the future by senior figures in the politics, clergy, and the security establishment in order to obstruct him if they reach the conclusion that his policy is no longer in line with national interests or the principles of the regime.

Iran's President Hassan Rowhani, who returned recently (September 28th) from the UN General Assembly convention in New York, was faced with a mixed reception upon his return to Tehran. While several hundred citizens cheered the president and expressed their support, a small group of students demonstrated against the rapprochement between Iran and the USA. The demonstrators chanted "Death to America", and some even hurled eggs and shoes at the convoy that drove the president from the airport.

On the morning following the incident in Tehran airport, a group of students, members of the Basij organization, held a press conference where they assumed responsibility for organizing the protest demonstration against the president and announced the establishment of the Committee for the Protection of Iranian Interests ( کمیته صیانت از منافع ایران ).



**First press conference of the Committee for the Protection of Iranian Interests**

The students claimed that the protest demonstration at the airport was meant to convey a "friendly warning" from the students and citizens to Rowhani, in view of past experience that proved his problematic handling of negotiations with the West over the Iranian nuclear plan. They stressed that they initially wished to carry out a quiet protest and had no intention of harming the president, but were forced to hurl shoes at the president's convoy after being almost run over by the convoy.

The committee members demanded that the president present to the Iranian public a detailed account on the negotiations he held during his visit to New York, and make public the contents of his talks with President Barack Obama. The students stressed that the American attitude towards Iran has not undergone the slightest change and

claimed that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei did not change his stance about the USA. They warned against creating an atmosphere that would allow the government to do as it pleases, presuming to enjoy the support of the Supreme Leader.

The committee representatives claimed that the international economic sanctions cannot be cited as the reason for the problems faced by Iran, and demanded that the government focus on resolving the economic issues rather than claiming that the resolution of those issues depends on negotiating with the USA. They declared that they intend to continue their protests, and even increase their scope by protesting outside Tehran (<https://sianat.org/?p=156>).



The protest demonstration against President Rowhani upon his return from the UN Assembly

### The activity of the Committee for the Protection of Iranian Interests

Last week the committee published a public letter addressed to the president, in which its members reaffirmed their staunch resistance to negotiating with the USA. They stressed that the Supreme Leader had expressed in the past his opinion that the USA was only interested in using the negotiations with Iran as means to enforce the American stance on the Iranians. The letter detailed the “crimes” perpetrated by the USA against Iran, starting from the American involvement in the coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 up to the continuing American attempts, ever since the Islamic revolution, to overthrow the Iranian regime and harm Iranian citizens.

The committee representatives expressed their lack of faith in the Iranian negotiation team, which they claimed led the concessions policy in 2003, and demanded that the

president inform the public about any agreements reached with the USA. The president, they said, must clarify to the citizens the objective of the talks with the Americans, and specify how those talks serve Iran's national interests. The president must also provide explanations about the contradicting declarations by senior government figures, some of whom claimed that the talks with the USA are only focused on the nuclear issue while others declared that the two countries are also expected to discuss additional issues that concern their mutual relationship (<http://sianat.org/?p=327>).

Upon the beginning of the committee's operation, its members launched a website hosting articles, memorandums of opinion and reports about its activity. Following the joint press conference President Obama held with Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu, the website published comments by the committee's spokesman, Vahid Ashtari. Ashtari claimed that President Obama's declaration that regarding the Iranian issue, the USA "won't take any options off the table", proved that the concerns felt and expressed by the committee members were by no means groundless, and that there is no basis to the government's claim that the talks held by President Rowhani in the USA succeeded in bringing about achievements for Iran and preserving its national dignity. Ashtari added that the committee members planned to continue their activities in the following few days. The activities will include distributing memorandums of opinion and petitions, holding conferences and initiating political confrontations. These activities, he said, are meant to turn into a wave that will mobilize the entire public in order to prevent putting Iran up for sale (<http://sianat.org/?p=276>).

A series of articles published on the website in the last few days categorically objected to any negotiations with the USA, and denied the claim that the Supreme Leader supports the tendency of rapprochement between the two countries. A commentary article published on the website last week included a detailed analysis of the term "heroic flexibility", to which the Leader referred in his speech to the Revolutionary Guards commanders on September 17. According to the article, there is no basis to the claim that Khamenei intended to justify the need to follow in the footsteps of the second Shiite Imam, Hassan bin Ali, who signed a peace treaty with the Umayyad caliph Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan, or in the footsteps of the founder of the Islamic revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini, who in 1988 consented to sign a cease-fire agreement with Iraq.

According to the author of the article, there is no similarity between the current conditions in Iran and the conditions prevailing in the first years of Islam, which led to the signing of the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, the cease-fire agreement reached between Prophet Muhammad and the rulers of Mecca in 628, as well as to the signing of the peace agreement between the Imam Hassan and Muawiyah in 661. The conditions that necessitated the cease-fire with Iraq at the end of the eight-year war do not exist today as well.

While the economic sanctions do affect the lives of the citizens of Iran, they can be dealt with in various ways, and there are still new ways that have not yet been realized and that can help reducing the economic pressure. Iran has not reached an economic or political dead end, and it is Iran's enemies that confront considerable weakness, both within and without their boundaries.

The author of the article also rejected the claims that the latest presidential elections reflected the weariness of the Iranian public and its willingness to compromise. He said that the mere participation of the Iranian citizens in the elections, despite the sanctions and the international pressures, proved their continuing affiliation with the revolution and its values. The voters who elected Rowhani were also driven to do so in light of the conservative views he expressed in the past on internal and foreign issues. The Iranian public stands firm against the sanctions, and there is no basis to the claim that Iranian citizens are willing to withdraw their support of the revolutionary slogans and the path of resistance.

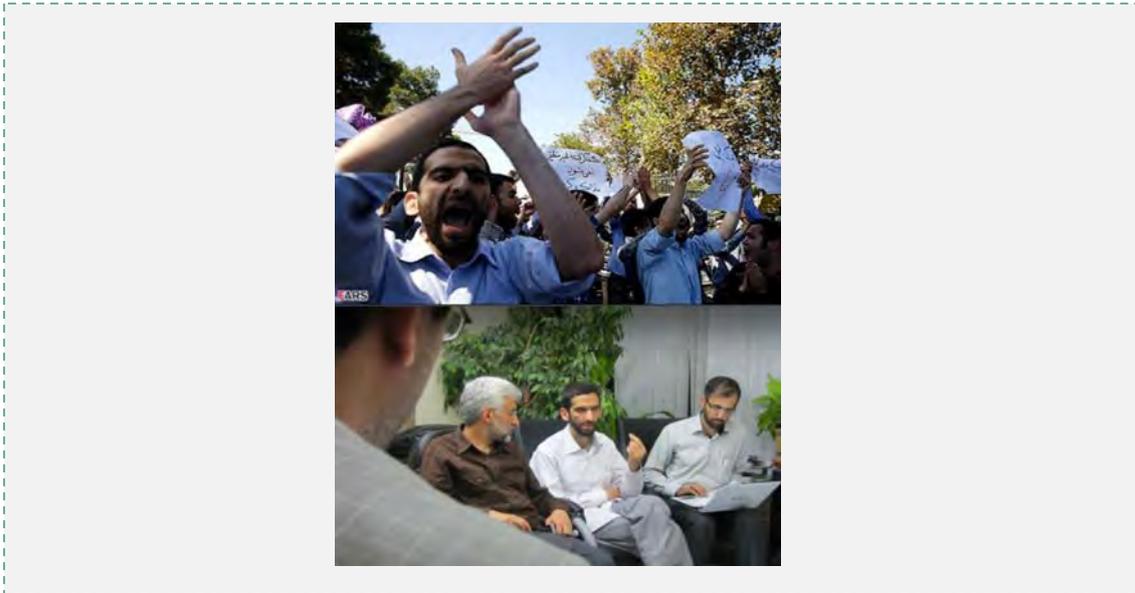
With regard to the Supreme Leader's position on foreign policy, the article said that Khamenei never changed his views, which are based on the revolutionary values. While the Leader never expressed an in-principle objection to negotiating with the USA, he did condition such negotiations on meeting several conditions. These conditions included the demands that the USA change its position with regard to Iran, indemnify Iran for the crimes the USA perpetrated against it and the damages it inflicted on Iran throughout the years, stop its attempts to replace the Iranian regime, and put an end to the American support of Israel. As these conditions were not met, there is no reason to change the Iranian stance towards the USA. According to the author of the article, the Supreme Leader's speech about "heroic flexibility" does not testify to any change in his views, because in this speech he reaffirmed his objection to deviating from the values and principles of the revolution. Khamenei stressed that "red lines" should not be crossed, and warned against withdrawal from the enemies of Iran.

The author rejected the claim that the government would not have negotiated with the USA without the Supreme Leader's approval, and claimed that in past cases, Iranian senior officials pursued a policy that was not in line with the positions of the Supreme Leader. Such was the case with Majles speaker Ali Larijani, who met the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in defiance of Khamenei's views. In certain cases the public must take a clear ideological stance, which would strengthen the Leader in view of the pressures exerted on him by those who seek compromise. When the Leader understood in 2003 that the public opposed compromises with regard to the nuclear program, he went back on his support of the government's concession policy and declared his objection to the compromise. It is the public's responsibility to stress the need for safeguarding the nation's values when reaching decisions, as well as to oppose wrong decisions.

The article concludes with the need to staunchly express objection to negotiations with the "Great Satan", remind the public of the crimes the USA committed against Iran, demand that the government set forth a "resistance economy", and emphasize that the industrial and economic development of Iran depends on the continuation of the nuclear plan (<http://sianat.org/?p=302>).

### **The political affiliation of the committee members**

In the press conference held by the Committee for the Protection of Iranian Interests, the committee spokesman rejected the claims that its members were motivated by political reasons. He also denied that they were linked in any way to Saeed Jalili. In the recent elections, the candidacy of Jalili, who until recently served as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, was supported by the Steadfastness Front that is identified with the radical right. The claim about the committee's links to Jalili was raised following the publication of photographs which proved that one of the committee members - Mohammad Sadeq Shahbazi, who even took part in the demonstration at Tehran airport - was an activist in Jalili's election headquarters. Following the publication of these photos, the Asr-i Iran website demanded that Jalili clarify his ties with the demonstrating students and voice a clear position about the students' behavior at the airport. The website also demanded that Jalili clarify what measures the authorities would have taken at the time he served as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, had anyone carried out a similar attack against President Ahmadinejad.



**Mohammad Sadeq Shahbazi during the protest demonstration in Tehran (upper picture at the left) and beside Saeed Jalili during the election campaign (lower picture at the center)**

With regard to these claims, Ashtari indicated that the committee includes members who voted for various candidates in the latest elections, and that disagreements still exist among the committee members. He noted that the committee members are “concerned citizens”, of whom some operate within student organizations and some operate independently. Other committee members also rejected the claims about their political affiliation, and stressed that they do not take part in “political games” in favor of a specific party or specific politicians but rather support anyone who is willing to protect national interests and civil rights.

Initial review of the committee composition clearly indicates that its members are active in the students’ Basij and are affiliated with radical right groups. The most prominent committee members are Vahid Ashtari, the committee’s spokesman, and Mohammad Sadeq Shahbazi. Ashtari, who currently pursues his studies for MA in diplomacy, is probably the student Basij spokesman in the Law and Political Science Faculty in Tehran University. Ashtari has a Facebook account that has been inactive since 2011 (<https://www.facebook.com/vashtari1?fref=ts>), and an extremely active Google Plus account (<https://plus.google.com/112885720292890872874/posts>). During the presidential elections Ashtari used his account to distribute contents that supported the candidacy of Saeed Jalili.



**Vahid Ashtari's Google Plus account**

Shahbazi, who as mentioned above was active in Jalili's election headquarters, is an activist student who took part in many activities of radical right groups. He served as the secretary of a radical right student organization named the "Movement of Students Seeking Justice", which was involved in various protest activities. In May 2006 the said movement organized a conference in Tehran University, and during the conference announced the establishment of a fund aimed at "destroying Israel". In April 2008 Shahbazi took part in a demonstration held outside the Dutch embassy in Tehran in protest against the release of the Anti-Islamic movie created by the Dutch MP Geert Wilders. During Operation Cast Lead in January 2009, the "Movement of Students Seeking Justice" offered a one million dollar reward for anyone who would assassinate Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, following Mubarak's decision to close the Rafah Crossing with the Gaza Strip.

Just like Ashtari, Shahbazi also has an active Google Plus account (<https://plus.google.com/117910729982423577349/posts>), as well as a personal blog (<http://ghiam.ir/>). In a recent post he uploaded to his blog, Shahbazi defended the protest demonstrations against Rowhani at Tehran airport, claiming that the demonstrators' only vice was their objection to the negotiations with the "Great Satan" and to a deal that puts Iran's national interests at risk. Shahbazi urged the government to focus on resolving the economic crisis in Iran rather than directing its attention to political moves with the USA. He warned the government that if it prefers to divert its attention outside Iran instead of looking inside the country and focusing on the resolution of Iran's economic issues, the Iranian people will not stand still in the view of such "diversion" (<http://ghiam.ir/?p=1478>).

## Fear of resuming the political violence initiated by the radical right groups

The committee's activity, and in particular the attack on the president's convoy at the airport, drew sharp criticism in Iranian media, mainly from the president's supporters in the reformist faction. The harshest criticism was voiced by former president Mohammad Khatami, who warned that the activity of a "violent, non-rational faction" can result in attempts to assassinate politicians, such as the attempts that took place during the reformist regime. The warning referred to the failed attempt to assassinate his advisor, Saeed Hajjarian. This attempt, which took place in March 2000, left Hajjarian crippled. Khatami claimed that the radical groups do not seek to criticize but to destroy, and that in their organized activity against the government they express their scorn of the vote of the Iranian citizens in the recent elections, and of the decisions of the Supreme Leader (<http://www.khatami.ir/fa/news/1215.html>). President Rowhani also criticized the students who were involved in the incident at the airport and warned that the authorities would take legal measures against radical groups. He stressed that citizens are allowed to criticize the government, but must do so within the boundaries of the law (<http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/212894>-لابی-خالی-جای-باید-جمهور-قوی). (قوی-).

The concern expressed by President Khatami about the activity of radical groups stems from his past experience as president (1997-2005), during the period when the activity of the radical group Ansar Hezbollah reached its peak. This movement, which was founded in the 1990s, was involved in violent activity against reformist activists and high ranking officials, as well as in attempts to assassinate political rivals. In 2000 the controversial testimony of Amir Farshad Ebrahimi, a former activist in the movement, was published. Ebrahimi admitted that high ranking conservative officials in the regime instructed the organization activists to attack reformist activists and even harm members of the Khatami government. Following his testimony Ebrahimi was sentenced to 48 months' imprisonment.

## Opponents of the president line up: what are the possible implications?

At this stage it seems that President Rowhani's policy enjoys the backing of high ranking regime officials, and first and foremost the backing of the Supreme Leader. Upon Rowhani's return from the UN assembly, most Iranian senior officials, including politicians identified with the conservative faction, expressed their support of the president. To provide but one example, Nategh Nouri, one of the Supreme Leader's senior advisors, declared that in his mission Rowhani kept in line with the principles laid down by Khamenei and preserved the Iranian dignity and national interests. He rejected the criticism about the telephone conversation Rowhani held with President Obama and indicated that this conversation by no means constituted a deviation from the principles of the revolution (<http://isna.ir/fa/news/92070906030/>). However, these expressions of support were accompanied by criticism drawn from the conservative right about the tendency of rapprochement with the USA. The Revolutionary Guards commander, Mohammad Ali Jafari, also openly voiced his reservations about the phone call President Rowhani held with President Obama.

In view of the backing Rowhani currently enjoys, it seems that the activity of his opponents in the framework of the Committee for the Protection of Iranian Interests mainly expresses the position of political, civil and security circles identified with the radical right, and it is doubtful whether this activity can significantly affect Rowhani's ability to advance his political initiatives.

This activity may, however, be used in the future by senior regime officials in order to bring the president back in line, if they reach the conclusion that his policy is no longer in line with the principles of the regime or that the policy crossed the "red lines" that will be defined by the Supreme Leader. In such a case senior officials in the political, clerical, and security establishment can use the organizational infrastructure currently formed by the president's opponents in order to reduce his leeway and dissuade him from pursuing his policy.



A cartoon by Nikahang Kowsar, which appeared in:  
<http://www.roozonline.com/persian/cartoon/cartoon-item/archive/2013/sepember/30/article/-3f6d0facc3.html>