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Spotlight on Iran

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Editor: Raz Zimmt

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Supreme Leader's website presents: thoughts and lessons from 2009 riots

Last week, Iran marked the anniversary of the violent clashes that had broken out in late December 2009 between security forces and the reformist opposition, after which the protest movement was effectively suppressed. On the occasion of the anniversary, the official website of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei (www.khamenei.ir) published a ten-day series of articles expressing the Supreme Leader's opinions and thoughts on the political crisis that had broken out in Iran following the presidential election in the summer of 2009.

The Supreme Leader's views were published in a series titled "Thoughts and Lessons", which consist of ten chapters addressing the various aspects of the conflict between the regime and

the opposition. The series offers an insight into Khamenei's views on the riots and their implications.

The Supreme Leader sees a direct, immediate connection between the riots led by the reformist opposition leaders and the "soft war" waged for several years by Iran's external enemies. The greatest sin of the "incitement" leaders, according to the Supreme Leader, was giving the enemies hope about the possibility of driving a wedge between the Iranian people and the regime leaders, and sowing dissent within the regime itself. The enemies of Iran, disheartened by the massive voter turnout for the presidential election, became hopeful once again that it was possible to lead a revolution to overthrow the regime. While Khamenei admits that the riots proved an "enormous challenge" for the regime, he claims that the Iranian people were fully successful in dealing with the challenge. Similarly to the strong stand the Iranian people took in the eight-year war against Iraq, they showed courage and resolve in dealing with the eight-month "soft war".

The stand taken by the Iranian people against their domestic and external enemies this past year is especially significant, according to the Supreme Leader. Not only did the enemies of Iran realized that the Iranian people were strong, but the war made them even stronger, providing them with new strength and allowing them to embark on a new phase of development.

The enemies of Iran sought to undermine the people's unity and create a rift between the masses and the regime leaders. Their true intent was to conquer Iran. The Supreme Leader warned that the fight against the enemies was still on, and that their continuing activities had to be monitored. The "front of arrogance" still operates against Iran: it imposes sanctions, spreads anti-Iranian incitement, and strengthens the domestic opposition. It makes use of political, cultural, and economic means. The U.S. even prevented a temporary shutdown of online social networks which it used to contact opposition activists. The UN Security Council resolutions against Iran, the Quran burning, the statements against Iran, the riots—all of that

reflects the activity of Iran's enemies, which stems from their concern about its growing strength and the possibility of it becoming the most influential country in the Middle East.

The Islamic republic is, however, stronger than ever as a result of last year's events. Its path is clearer than ever before; the Iranian people have a better understanding of the direction they have to follow, and who their friends and enemies are. The enemies of Iran wanted to present a distorted, pessimistic view of the reality facing the Iranian people in order to make Iran weaker. Their efforts failed, and the people can now identify better than before the propaganda spread by the enemy online and on the media. The citizens of Iran realize that presenting a pessimistic future prior to the election was also part of the enemy's propaganda. The enemies of Iran would have the people believe that Iran was in economic and political trouble. Now, the real picture emerges: Iran is strong and is an important player on the regional and international scene. Iran's enemies know, understand, and feel it, but obviously conceal it.

The Supreme Leader cites the opposition leaders' use of slogans based on the values of the revolution and the legacy of its leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, as an example of the Islamic republic's strength. Khamenei argues that while in the past the regime's opponents spoke out against the revolution leader and claimed that the revolution was dead, they no longer have the courage to do so, and they now use the slogans of Khomeini and the revolution to justify their position to the people. They understand the power of the slogans and their tremendous effect on the people. This indicates that Khomeini's path and the path of the revolution are now the accepted views among the Iranian public.

The massive pro-regime rallies after the December 2009 Ashura riots also proves, according to Khamenei, that the leaders of "incitement" are a minority within the people.

Concerns in Iran over South Sudan referendum

This week, Iran's conservative press expressed dissatisfaction with and concern over the referendum held in Sudan, in which the African residents of southern Sudan will decide if they want to be fully independent from the country's Arabic/Islamic-oriented north.

The conservative daily Keyhan defined the referendum as a new Western plot in Africa designed to split Sudan in two. According to the daily, the U.S., Israel, and the West have always had their eyes on southern Sudan, a region endowed with 85 percent of the country's oil and natural sources and a critically important source of water for Egypt, Sudan, and nine other African countries. The referendum may now turn the Western countries' plots into reality.

The daily reported warnings issued by senior officials from northern Sudan about the possible implications of the referendum on regional stability, as well as the remarks made by southern Sudanese leaders on their intentions to establish diplomatic relations with Israel after becoming independent. The daily claimed that Israel intended to build dams on the rivers of southern Sudan to gain control over 11 countries in northern and eastern Africa to fulfill the vision of Greater Israel.

Keyhan warned that southern Sudan could become a stronghold for the U.S. and the Zionists, that a "second Israel" could be established in Africa, and that, following the Sudanese precedent, other African countries could be split in a way that would serve Israel's interests (Keyhan, January 9).

The daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami also called the referendum an imperialist plot concocted by the West to split Sudan. An editorial published by the daily earlier this week says that the effects of the dangerous plots against Sudan will not be limited to that country alone. The daily criticized Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir's agreement to hold the referendum, claiming he had succumbed to pressure exerted by the West to pull his country out of political isolation. According to the daily, Al-Bashir was willing to sell a part of his country to retain control over the remainder of Sudan's territory.

The daily argued that Zionist circles are interested in establishing a "second Israel" in that sensitive part of Africa, and therefore took an integral part in the plan to split the country in two. The autonomous administration in southern Sudan already has extensive ties with the "Zionist regime", and many of the region's hotels and trade centers have been purchased by Zionist companies. Unofficially, the leaders of southern Sudan have been purchasing considerable quantities of weapons from Israel. The Zionist lobby in the U.S. also played an active role in the implementation of the plan to divide Sudan.

According to Jomhuri-ye Eslami, the division of Sudan is an act of aggression against Muslim countries and the interests of the Muslim world. It is the silence of Muslim countries over the developments in Sudan that facilitated the activity of Zionist-related anti-Islamic circles. If the silence continues, the Zionist schemes will expand to many other Muslim countries (Jomhuri-ye Eslami, January 9).

The conservative daily Siyasat-e Rooz also addressed the Sudan referendum, claiming it was part of a project implemented by the West in recent years to tighten its hold over the world under the pretext of promoting democracy and liberty. The first phase in the implementation

of the project is the occupation of Afghanistan, the second is the occupation of Iraq, then followed by attacks on Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen.

The organizers of the referendum want to divide Sudan. It will not be the last country to fall victim to the Western plot, making the unity of the Muslim world absolutely essential (Siyasat-e Rooz, January 11).

Transportation Minister strongly criticized over plane crash in northern Iran

Iran's Transportation Minister was strongly criticized this week over the crash of an Iran Air plane in north-western Iran, in which 77 people were killed. The Boeing-747 was en route from Tehran to Orumiyeh when it unsuccessfully attempted an emergency landing.

Following the accident, Transportation Minister Hamid Behbehani said that the number of aviation accidents in Iran was still low compared to the world average. Behbehani's statement was strongly criticized by some Iranian media.

Farda, a website affiliated with the pragmatic conservative bloc, claimed that the minister's remarks showed complete disregard of criticism and public concerns over the frequent aviation accidents in Iran. The website said that Iranians killed in aviation accidents in the past thirty years made up nearly 30 percent of total aviation accident fatalities in the world (1,610 out of 5,416 people killed). 795 people were killed in aviation accidents in Iran in the past seven years, about 23 percent of the total aviation accident fatalities in the world in the same period. In neighboring countries such as Turkey, the UAE, and Bahrain, where there are more aviation accidents compared to Iran, the number of victims was not as high. If the Transportation Minister has so far been able to avoid being impeached by the Majles in various ways and under various pretexts, Farda says, he should now tell the public how many victims and accidents it will take for him to give more serious thought to the issue of aviation accidents (Farda, January 10).

The website Asr-e Iran also criticized Iran's transportation and aviation authorities, wondering why they had cleared the plane for takeoff despite the rough weather at the time of its departure from Tehran. The website also wondered whether the Orumiyeh airport was properly equipped to allow aircraft to land in rough weather.

The website pointed out some organizational problems in Iran's Aviation Organization, claiming they were the cause of organizational instability that may indirectly affect air safety conditions. Instead of going to the crash site in the middle of the night, the Transportation

Minister would do better to make the right decisions to prevent aviation accidents, the website said.

The website also criticized the official broadcasting authority, which had failed to provide real-time, satisfactory coverage of the crash, and had not given the public the necessary information about the casualties and their families in the first hours after the accident (Asr-e Iran, January 10).

In a commentary article published by reformist politician Ata'ollah Mohajerani on Jaras, a website affiliated with the supporters of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the former Islamic guidance minister in Khatami's government strongly criticized the Transportation Minister, saying that the minister should have apologized and said he was sorry rather than make false statements.

Mohajerani, who had left Iran in 2009, claimed that even though Iranians are only one percent of the world's population, they comprise nearly 30 percent of the world's air accident fatalities since the revolution. Iran is also the world leader in the number of car accident fatalities. For Mohajerani it is proof of the government's helplessness, and the responsibility for the government's functioning lies with the Supreme Leader and the Majles members (Jaras, January 1).

The reformist daily Mardom Salari also addressed the plane crash, claiming that the frequent aviation accidents could not be blamed solely on the sanctions imposed on Iran, and that one could not ignore the faulty management of the Transportation Ministry. According to the daily, even though aviation experts had warned that the plane that crashed should be withdrawn from service, it was put back in service for unclear reasons. Since thousands of people are killed in traffic accidents every year, they cannot be blamed solely on the sanctions. It may be time, the daily suggested, that those in charge find comprehensive solutions to the problem and put more significance on the lives of the Iranian people and their property (Mardom Salari, January 11).

Following the accident, the Majles Construction Committee summoned the Transportation Minister to appear by next Sunday and provide answers about the circumstances of the plane crash. The committee intends to draft a report about the accident after the minister's appearance and present it to the public (Fars, January 10).

In recent years, Iran has known several serious aviation disasters which claimed dozens of lives. In July 2009, nearly 20 people were killed when an Ilyushin Il-62 en route from Tehran to Mashhad (northeastern Iran) overran a runway and crashed at the Mashhad airport. 153 passengers were on board the aircraft. The aviation disaster took place a mere nine days after the crash of a Russian-made Tupolev, operated by Iran's Caspian Airlines, on a flight from Tehran to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. All 168 passengers and crew on board died when the plane crashed outside the city of Qazvin in northwestern Iran.

According to various estimates, about one third of all planes used by Iran's airlines are not safe for operation. The planes operated by Iran Air, the country's national airline, are nearly 25 years old on average. The Boeing that crashed this week was 37 years old. The severe safety issues plaguing Iran's planes are the result of the Western economic embargo on Iran, forcing the airlines to make use of non-original spare parts made in Iran or purchased on the black market, as well as Russian-made planes, considered less safe. Following the latest aviation accidents, senior officials in Iran blamed the U.S. for the death of innocent civilians as a result of the embargo on spare parts for airplanes.

Crackdown on "soft war": authorities ban political use of social networks, establish a "cyber police", step up efforts to "purge" Internet

Hamid-Reza Fouladgar, member of the Majles Article 10 Commission on Political Parties, announced last week that, in accordance with recent changes in the Parties Law, political parties are no longer allowed to use social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

In light of the soft war waged against Iran, political parties will not be able to use such networks for their activity or to recruit new members, Fouladgar said, and the use of social networks by official political parties will be considered a criminal offense. He added that the changes introduced in the law were designed to step up the monitoring of political parties and bring about a situation where there are fewer, yet more socially active parties in Iran (Fars, January 8).

The use of social networks significantly increased in the last presidential election in 2009. They were used by some presidential candidates, most notably the two reformist candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi. The use of social networks, mainly Facebook, was aimed to allow the reformist candidates to address the public directly, balancing the considerable advantage enjoyed by President Ahmadinejad thanks to the conservatives' almost total control over official media. It was also the assessment of the reformist candidates that the use of new technologies would allow them to establish their status with Iran's younger generation.

At the same time, Telecommunications Minister Reza Taqi-Pour announced further efforts to "purge" Iran's internet of immoral content. In an interview to Mehr News Agency, the minister said that while he did not have exact figures on the extent of improper internet use in Iran, comparison with other countries showed that, to a considerable extent, internet use in Iran is proper and right, and the internet environment is generally "clean".

Iran's Telecommunications Minister Reza Taqi-Pour

He further stated that, in the coming year, the Telecommunications Ministry intended to help increase the proper use of the internet by implementing the idea of separating "clean internet" and "unclean internet". The minister, who did not specify what measures his ministry would take to implement the idea, noted that it would first be put to practice in Iran and then promoted by Iran worldwide. He said the idea would make it possible to make the entire internet environment clean and prevent its use for immoral purposes. Referring to the Iranian practice of filtering websites, the minister said that such filtering was not the responsibility of the ministry but rather the computer crime team (Mehr, January 8).

Meanwhile, internal security forces chief Esma'il Ahmadi-Moqaddam announced this week that the "cyber police" would begin operating next week. Its operations will begin in Tehran and then spread to the rest of Iran. It will be the cyber police's job to enforce the computer crime law passed last year by the Majles (Mehr, January 11).

In the past year, Iranian authorities have stepped up the monitoring of websites and blogs following the approval of the computer crime draft law and the announcement of the judiciary branch on the establishment of a special court to handle computer and internet crimes. In that context, there have been more efforts to filter websites and blogs, and more arrests of civilians involved in the operation of banned websites.

A special committee was established under the computer crime law approved by the Majles to set the criteria for filtering websites. Its members include the morality safety police chief of the internal security forces, the ministers of education, telecommunications, justice, science, culture, and Islamic guidance (or representatives on their behalf), the chairman of the Islamic Propagation Organization, the chairman of the broadcasting authority, an expert on computer technology and telecommunications, and a Majles representative.

Pictures of the week: season's first snow in Tehran