



The Meir Amit Intelligence
and Terrorism Information Center



Highlights of the week

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- ✓ Are clerics key to Iran-Egypt rapprochement?
- ✓ Strong criticism of president's decision to appoint Mohammad Ali-Abadi as acting petroleum minister
- ✓ "Clean internet" coming soon to Iran: 8000 Basij members to participate in program to establish closed national internet network
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Increasing efforts to secure Supreme Leader's religious status amidst challenges to his leadership

Sobh-e Sadeq, a weekly published on behalf of the Supreme Leader's representative to the Revolutionary Guards, published a front-page editorial titled "Why Imam Khamenei?" Authored by Yadollah Javani, the head of the Revolutionary Guards' political department, the article argues that, just like Islamic revolution founder Ayatollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei deserves the title of "imam".

The author of the article contends that it was a serious mistake not to grant Khamenei the title of "imam" immediately after being appointed Supreme Leader by the Assembly of Experts following Khomeini's death in 1989. He called on Iran Broadcasting and on Friday prayer leaders to use that term when referring to Khamenei and to make sure the public understands that the use of the term "imam" stems from the principles of Islamic religious law and the concept of "rule of the religious jurispudent".

Yadollah Javani's article is yet another manifestation of the increasing efforts made in the past year by traditional-conservative quarters to stress the imperative of obeying the Supreme Leader and secure his religious status in light of increasing challenges to his leadership and religious authority from both the reformist opposition and the president and his supporters. In recent months there have also been attempts to portray Khamenei as having superhuman qualities.

Are clerics key to Iran-Egypt rapprochement?

In recent weeks there has been a noticeable trend of increased cooperation between Iran's Shi'ite religious establishment and the Al-Azhar religious center in Cairo.

Ayatollah Morteza Moqtada'i, member of the Assembly of Experts and supervisor of the religious seminaries in the city of Qom, spoke in favor of closer cooperation between the Iranian religious establishment and Al-Azhar. During a conference of Shi'ite and Sunni clerics held in Golestan Province, the senior cleric reported that he had recently established a good relationship with Sheikh Al-Azhar, whom he invited to visit the religious seminaries in Qom to strengthen the ties between the Iranian and Egyptian religious institutions. The fall of President Mubarak, Moqtada'i said, cleared the way towards increased cooperation between the clerics in Iran and in Egypt.

The head of the Middle East affairs department in Iran's Foreign Ministry also called for closer cooperation between the religious establishment in Iran and the clerics in Egypt, claiming that the relationship between the religious seminaries in Qom and Al-Azhar is a vital one.

Last week some 50 guests from Egypt, including clerics from Al-Azhar, took part in a conference held in Tehran to discuss the "Islamic awakening" in the region.

The conservative daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami recently commended a memorandum of opinion published by the Al-Azhar institution in the wake of the uprising in Egypt, which demanded greater independence for the institution from the regime and comprehensive reforms in the way it conducts its affairs. An editorial published by the daily said that the rift between Al-Azhar and the Egyptian people, reflected during the popular uprising in Egypt, has its source in the institution's becoming part of the Egyptian administrative apparatus. The daily argued that the uprising is the perfect opportunity to revive the historic status of Al-Azhar and restore its independence.

Strong criticism of president's decision to appoint Mohammad Ali-Abadi as acting petroleum minister

This week the president's critics strongly criticized Ahmadinejad's decision to temporarily put his close associate Mohammad Ali-Abadi in charge of the Petroleum Ministry. Ahmadinejad was forced to appoint an acting petroleum minister after the Guardian Council ruled that he could not hold that position himself until the upcoming merger of the petroleum and energy ministries, on which the government had decided earlier, and the appointment of a permanent minister.

For the past two years, Ali-Abadi, former chief of the Physical Education Organization, served as chief of Iran's Fishing Organization. He is also the head of the Iranian Olympic Committee. Following the establishment of Ahmadinejad's second government in 2009 the Majles rejected his appointment as energy minister.

In response to the president's decision, Majles Energy Committee chairman Hamid-Reza Katouzian said that Ali-Abadi was the worst choice for the petroleum and gas industry. He said that Ali-Abadi has no understanding of the Petroleum Ministry's areas of responsibility and that his appointment is a danger to the country.

The Asr-e Iran website also strongly criticized Ali-Abadi's appointment as acting petroleum minister, wondering if there was not a single worthy executive in the Petroleum Ministry to hold that position that the president saw fit to appoint a man with no experience in the petroleum industry. A commentary article published by the website cited this as yet another example of Ahmadinejad's

problematic policy of appointments. When the president's critics are unwilling to approve the appointment of one of his associates, the president appoints him to an even higher post.

“Clean internet” coming soon to Iran: 8000 Basij members to participate in program to establish closed national internet network

Sa'id Farjian-Zadeh, the head of the Basij Information and Technology Organization, said last week that 8000 Basij members will participate in a program launched by the Telecommunications Ministry to establish a closed national internet network in Iran (“clean internet”). He reported that the organization he heads has been recently established to expand “Islamic thought” on cyberspace and to help deal with the cyber threats facing Iran.

This week Mehr News Agency reported progress in the implementation of the Telecommunications Ministry's program to create a separate “clean internet” network in Iran. First announced by the telecommunications minister in late 2010, the program aims to “purge” Iran's internet of immoral content and provide the authorities with more control over web traffic. The authorities also promote another program called “Halal Internet” (an internet that conforms to Islamic religious law) to allow Iranians “safe” (moral-wise) access to the world wide web.

Meanwhile, the minister of Islamic guidance announced this week that his ministry is working to create “digital centers” in mosques across Iran to provide believers with greater access to “clean internet”.

Increasing efforts to secure Supreme Leader's religious status amidst challenges to his leadership

Sobh-e Sadeq, a weekly published on behalf of the Supreme Leader's representative to the Revolutionary Guards, published a front-page editorial titled “Why Imam Khamenei?” Authored by Yadollah Javani, the head of the Revolutionary Guards' political department, the article argues that, just like Islamic revolution founder Ayatollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei deserves the title of “imam”.

The article states that the custom of referring to Khomeini as “imam”, a title until then reserved for the 12 Shi'ite imams descended from Ali bin Abi Talib, was based on Shi'ite legal and political views according to which the leader of an Islamic society ruled by a religious government deserves the title of “imam”. Since the Islamic republic of Iran is based on Islamic religious rule and guided by the principle of “rule of the religious jurispudent”, it is

only appropriate that this title should be used to refer to Ayatollah Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader.

The author of the article contends that it was a serious mistake not to grant Khamenei the title of “imam” immediately after he had been appointed Supreme Leader by the Assembly of Experts following Khomeini’s death in 1989. It is his view that, after Khomeini’s death, some believed that it would be irreverent to use the same title to refer to Khamenei; however, now is the time to courageously admit that it was a mistake, which many indeed acknowledged following the riots that broke out after the 2009 presidential elections. He noted that the use of the term to refer to Khamenei is now becoming more and more widespread in society, among the Iranian people and top officials, and by some media.



<http://jamal2878.farsnama.com>

Javani claims that Iran Broadcasting and Friday prayer leaders have a major role in spreading the use of the title of “imam” for Khamenei, and that it is the title they must use when referring to the Supreme Leader. Javani noted that, according to Islamic religious law and the concept of “rule of the religious jurispudent”, the faithful must express their obedience to God in three ways: obedience to Prophet Muhammad, to Shi’ite imams, and to the religious jurispudent, who serves as the representative of the Vanished Imam during the time of his absence. The concept of “rule of the religious jurispudent” signifies that there is no difference between the religious jurispudent and the imam when it comes to authority to manage state affairs. The ruling authority once enjoyed by Khomeini is now in the hands of Khamenei, and it is therefore appropriate that he should be called “imam” (Sobh-e Sadeq, June 6).

Yadollah Javani’s article is yet another manifestation of the increasing efforts made in the past year by traditional-conservative quarters to stress the imperative of obeying the Supreme Leader and secure his religious status in light of increasing challenges to his leadership and religious authority from both the reformist opposition and the president and his supporters (who have been given the nickname “the deviant faction”).

In July 2010 the conservative website Raja News published a fatwa issued by the Supreme Leader in which he ruled that obedience to his instructions was the manifestation of commitment to the religious jurist while the Vanished Imam is absent. At the same time, senior Iranian officials stressed the imperative of obeying the Supreme Leader and the major role played by the concept of "rule of the religious jurist" in the Islamic republic. For example, in July 2010, Hojjat-ol-Eslam Seyyed Mohammad Sa'idi, the Friday prayer leader in the city of Qom, announced that accepting the "rule of the religious jurist" was a condition for accepting the rule of the Vanished Imam.

Another example of the efforts to strengthen Khamenei's status can be found in the attempts made to portray him as having superhuman qualities. In April 2011 Hojjat-ol-Eslam Sa'idi gave a sermon in which he claimed that Khamenei said "Ya Ali" at birth, a common utterance among Shi'ites attributed to the first Shi'ite imam, Ali bin Abi Taleb. The recently-distributed documentary "The Reappearance [of the Twelfth Imam] is Imminent" claims that Ali Khamenei is Seyyed Khorasani, who according to Shi'ite tradition will lead the community of believers in the time leading up to the return of the Twelfth Imam.

It should be noted that Khamenei's 1989 appointment as the successor of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was perceived as a blatant violation of the principle of "rule of the religious jurist", since Khamenei was not the highest-ranking cleric and not recognized as a "source of emulation" (*Marja'-e Taghliid*). Several top clerics protested about Khamenei's insufficient theological skills. The challenges to Khamenei's political leadership and theological skills intensified amidst the political crisis that broke out after the presidential elections in the summer of 2009 and in light of the escalating political struggles in the Iranian senior echelon in recent months.

Are clerics key to Iran-Egypt rapprochement?

Ayatollah Morteza Moqtada'i, member of the Assembly of Experts and supervisor of the religious seminaries in the city of Qom, spoke in favor of closer cooperation between the Iranian religious establishment and the Al-Azhar religious institution in Egypt. During a conference of Shi'ite and Sunni clerics held in Golestan Province, the senior cleric reported that he had recently established a good relationship with Sheikh Al-Azhar, whom he invited to visit the religious seminaries in Qom to foster the ties between the Iranian and Egyptian religious institutions.

The top cleric claimed that the tyrannical regime that had until recently ruled Egypt made it impossible for Al-Azhar leaders to receive authorization to cooperate with Iran's religious establishment, but that Mubarak's fall cleared the way towards such cooperation. According

to Moqtada'i, in recent days he met with a delegation of clerics from Al-Azhar who suggested establishing scientific relations between the leading religious institution in Egypt and the religious seminaries in Qom. Moqtada'i welcomed the initiative and noted that the religious seminaries in Qom intend to look into the possibility of sending Iranian religion students to study in Al-Azhar and invite Egyptian religion students to study in Qom (Rasa News, June 2).

Mojtaba Ferdowsi-Pour, the head of the Middle East affairs department in Iran's Foreign Ministry, also called for closer cooperation between the religious establishment in Iran and the clerics in Egypt. Speaking this week about the latest developments in the Arab world, Ferdowsi-Pour said that the religious and Islamic awakening is currently the top priority of the popular uprisings in the region, and that the developments in the Arab world have been influenced by the Islamic revolution in Iran. He further noted that the relationship between the religious seminaries in Qom and Al-Azhar is a vital one and has to be reinforced (Rasa News, June 2).

Meanwhile, last week Fars News Agency cited Egyptian sources as saying that the head of Egypt's Shi'ite Council had recently called on senior Iranian officials to strengthen the cooperation between Al-Azhar and the clerics in Qom. In a letter sent by Mohammad al-Darini to senior Iranian officials, the head of Egypt's Shi'ite Council suggested increasing religious, cultural, political, and economic cooperation between Iran and Egypt (Fars, June 1). Al-Darini's letter was delivered by an Egyptian delegation that took part in a conference held in Tehran last week to discuss the "Islamic awakening" in the region. The delegation consisted of about 50 people, including clerics from Al-Azhar.

In a speech given by delegation member Sheikh Alawi Amin to the conference, the Al-Azhar lecturer claimed that the sermon delivered by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei on February 4, in which he strongly condemned President Mubarak and called on the Egyptian people to rise up against him, had had a profound impact on the Egyptian people and precipitated Mubarak's fall one week later (Press TV, June 1). In an interview given by Amin to IRNA, the official news agency, the Egyptian cleric noted that the Egyptian revolutionists would like to draw upon the experience of the Islamic revolution (IRNA, May 29).



Alawi Amin delivering a sermon during the Friday prayer in the city of Qom, May 27 (www.taghribnews.com)

The conservative daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami recently commended a memorandum of opinion published by the Al-Azhar institution in the wake of the uprising in Egypt, which demanded greater independence for the institution from the regime and comprehensive reforms in the way it conducts its affairs. An editorial published by the daily said that the memorandum, addressed to Egypt's High Military Council, reflects recognition on the part of Al-Azhar's clerics of the institution's failures and hesitancy during the dramatic developments that led to the fall of President Mubarak.

The daily claimed that the rift between Al-Azhar and the Egyptian people, as seen during the popular uprising in Egypt, has its source in the institution's becoming part of the Egyptian administrative apparatus. If Al-Azhar can regain and preserve its independence, the article said, it will be a major contribution for the independence of Egypt. One of the main sources of power of the Shi'ite religious establishment in Iran is its ability to remain economically independent from the regime. The uprising in Egypt is the perfect opportunity to revive Al-Azhar's historic status, and the memorandum of opinion released by the clerics is a positive first step towards restoring its independence and the respect it enjoyed from the Egyptian people and other Muslim nations (Jomhuri-ye Eslami, May 18).

Immediately after President Mubarak's fall, the Institute for Reconciliation, which works for Shi'ite-Sunni rapprochement, issued a call for Al-Azhar clerics to set themselves free from the bonds of the regime and reclaim their place as the champions of truth and defenders of the oppressed (www.hawzahnews.com, February 12).

Attempts to increase the cooperation between the Shi'ite religious establishment in Iran and the Egyptian religious establishment, based in Al-Azhar, date back to the 1940s. The year 1948 saw the establishment of the Institute for Reconciliation (Dar al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhaheb). Led by Mahmoud Shaltout, the then sheikh of Al-Azhar, the institute included clerics from Egypt, Iran, and other Muslim countries. It mostly served as a forum for talks and publications. Following the Free Officers Revolution in 1952, the institute gained support

from Gamal Abdel Nasser, who considered it an instrument for the advancement of his status in the Arab world.

As part of the contacts held by Iran and Egypt in the late 1950s to improve their relations (which ceased when the two countries cut off diplomatic ties in 1960), senior Shi'ite clerics engaged in a dialogue with prominent figures belonging to the religious establishment in Al-Azhar. The dialogue was made possible thanks to a fatwa issued by Shaltout in 1959 which recognized Shi'a as a legitimate school of thought in Islam.

Strong criticism of president's decision to appoint Mohammad Ali-Abadi as acting petroleum minister

This week the president's critics strongly criticized Ahmadinejad's decision to temporarily put his close associate Mohammad Ali-Abadi in charge of the Petroleum Ministry. Ahmadinejad was forced to appoint an acting petroleum minister after the Guardian Council ruled that he could not hold that position himself until the upcoming merger of the petroleum and energy ministries, on which the government had decided earlier, and the appointment of a permanent minister.

For the past two years, Ali-Abadi, former chief of the Physical Education Organization, served as chief of Iran's Fishing Organization. He is also the head of the Iranian Olympic Committee. Following the establishment of Ahmadinejad's second government in 2009 the Majles refused to approve his appointment as energy minister.

The president's critics claimed that he took advantage of the Majles hiatus to appoint his close associate to the post. It is still unclear whether Ahmadinejad intends to nominate Ali-Abadi for permanent petroleum and energy minister after the two ministries are merged.



Ahmadinejad with Ali-Abadi (Asr-e Iran, June 2)

In response to the president's decision, Majles Energy Committee chairman Hamid-Reza Katouzian said that Ali-Abadi was the worst choice for the petroleum and gas industries. He noted that Ali-Abadi has no understanding of the Petroleum Ministry's areas of responsibility and that his appointment is a danger to the country. Petroleum and gas being a highly professional field, it also touches upon diplomatic, political, and economic issues, Katouzian said, in which Ali-Abadi has no expertise or experience. He may be a good construction engineer, but he cannot be put in charge of the Petroleum Ministry. The acting petroleum minister must have an understanding of petroleum production, the problems facing the petroleum industry, and the global conditions of the petroleum market, and Ali-Abadi's appointment to this post is completely unjustified.

Katouzian said that it was the pressure exerted by Majles members on the president which eventually forced him to temporarily appoint an acting petroleum minister. He added, however, that the president's decision to appoint Ali-Abadi did nothing to alleviate the Majles members' concerns about Iran's petroleum and gas interests (Mehr, June 3).

The Asr-e Iran website also strongly criticized Ali-Abadi's appointment as acting petroleum minister, wondering if there was not a single worthy executive in the Petroleum Ministry to hold that position that the president saw fit to appoint a man with no experience in the petroleum industry (Asr-e Iran, June 2).

The website argued that Ali-Abadi is not qualified enough even for a laborer or engineer position in the petroleum industry. A commentary article published by the website cited this as yet another example of Ahmadinejad's problematic policy of appointments. When the president's critics are unwilling to approve the appointment of one of his associates, Ahmadinejad appoints him to an even higher post. For example, the president appointed Hamid Baqa'i as vice president for executive affairs after the latter's failure as head of the Tourism and Cultural Heritage Organization, and is now appointing Ali-Abadi, whose appointment to energy minister was rejected by the Majles, to acting petroleum minister (Asr-e Iran, June 3).

The daily Mardom Salari published a sarcastic response to Ali-Abadi's appointment to acting petroleum minister. In a commentary article titled "Why Ali-Abadi has been put in charge of the Petroleum Ministry", the daily said that its investigation of the matter showed that Ali-Abadi's residence is located on Petroleum St. in Tehran. Therefore, there is nobody who knows petroleum and lives and breathes petroleum as much as he does (Mardom Salari, June 6).

“Clean internet” coming soon to Iran: 8000 Basij members to participate in program to establish closed national internet network

Sa'id Farjian-Zadeh, the head of the Basij Information and Technology Organization, said last week that 8000 Basij members will participate in a program launched by the Telecommunications Ministry to establish a closed national internet network in Iran.

In an interview to the Citna website (www.citna.ir, May 30), Farjian-Zadeh said that the organization he heads has been recently established to expand “Islamic thought” on cyberspace and to help deal with the cyber threats facing Iran. He noted that Reza Taqi-Pour, the telecommunications minister, had helped establish the organization, and that its engineers intend to cooperate with the Telecommunications Ministry in efforts to implement the “clean internet” program in accordance with the objectives of the multi-year development program. The involvement of Basij members in the cyber field and in information technology is required to realize the objectives in these fields, according to Farjian-Zadeh.



Sa'id Farjian-Zadeh, head of the Basij Information and Technology Organization (Engineers Basij website, www.basijmohandesin.ir)

This week Mehr News Agency reported progress in the implementation of the Telecommunications Ministry's program to create a separate “clean internet” network in Iran. First announced by the telecommunications minister in late 2010, the program aims to “purge” Iran's internet of immoral content. In early 2011 the minister reported that the Telecommunications Ministry intends to increase appropriate internet use by implementing the idea of separation between “clean internet” and “unclean internet”. According to the minister, the program will be first implemented in Iran and then promoted across the globe.

Mehr News Agency reported that the Telecommunication Ministry's program includes six stages:

Stage one: definition of the “clean internet” program, aimed to protect society against the negative influence of the global internet network by eliminating inappropriate content from cyberspace.

Stage two: separation between “clean internet” and “unclean internet”.

Stage three: launch of the program’s implementation by establishing think-tanks charged with bringing the idea from the initial concept stage to the execution stage. The think-tanks include scientists, intellectuals, and experts on information technology and telecommunications.

Stage four: integration of the Basij into activity for expanding the program. The recently-established Basij Information and Technology Organization is supposed to join the Telecommunications Ministry’s efforts to carry out the “clean internet” program, as well as efforts to combat the cyber threats facing Iran.

Stage five: export of “clean internet” outside of Iran. According to the Telecommunications Ministry’s program, Iran will make the relevant know-how available to other countries, mainly such Muslim countries as Malaysia and Persian Gulf states, interested in implementing the idea of “clean internet”. In this context, the telecommunications minister argued that humanity as a whole is interested in clean internet given the recognition of the threats posed by the internet to children, for example, and of the need for a clean internet environment.

Stage six: a program for “an internet that conforms to Islamic religious law”, to be implemented alongside the establishment of a closed national internet network that is separate from the global network. The intention to develop an internet that conforms to Islamic religious law (Halal Internet) was first announced in April 2011 by Dr. Ali Aqa-Mohammadi, the deputy for economic affairs of Ahmadinejad’s first vice president. Aqa-Mohammadi claimed that Halal Internet would make it possible to increase Iranians’ access to the global internet network for various uses, including government, commerce, and electronic banking services. He even reported that a consortium called Iranian Net was established to carry out the project and significantly expand the internet network (Mehr, June 2).

The government’s intention to establish a separate, closed internal national internet network that would be separate from the global network was first announced by senior Iranian officials in 2005. The establishment of a separate national network is considered one of the government projects designed to provide the regime with greater ability to control and monitor internet traffic, which it perceives as a major scene of activity used by Iran’s

domestic and foreign enemies. According to authorities, the launch of the internal network will make it possible to significantly decrease the cost of web surfing services and increase internet access speed.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Hosseini, the minister of Islamic guidance, announced this week that it is necessary to increase access to "clean internet" in mosques. Speaking at the opening ceremony of a digital center in the city of Tabriz, the minister said that his ministry is working to create "digital centers" in mosques across Iran to provide believers with low-cost internet services. He noted that such centers have been created in four provinces and will soon open in other regions as well (Fars, June 2).

Pictures of the week: 22th anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic revolution



