



Highlights of the week

1. International Qods Day in Iran: demonstrators express support for the Palestinian cause while the opposition puts on a show of strength
2. The Supreme Leader's authority continues to erode: clerics challenge Khamenei's ruling about the end of the month of Ramadan
3. Wave of assassinations of senior officials in Iranian Kurdistan: five officials assassinated in less than two weeks
4. In other Qods Day events: why did Iranian TV black out the coverage of a soccer game held in Tehran?
5. Iranians also send their holiday wishes by SMS: 91 million text messages during the 24 hours of Eid al-Fitr
6. School year begins in Iran

International Qods Day: demonstrators express support for the Palestinians while the opposition puts on a show of strength

On Friday, September 18, Iran marked the International Qods Day (i.e., Jerusalem Day), held annually on the last Friday of the month of Ramadan since the Islamic revolution. Similarly to previous years, this year's Qods Day was marked by mass rallies and demonstrations in which top Iranian officials and leaders gave speeches condemning Israel and expressing support for the Palestinian people's struggle. Hundreds of thousands of protesters chanted slogans

against Israel and Western countries and burned Israeli, American, British, German, and French flags.



Not surprisingly, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gave a hate speech against Israel, defining the struggle against the "Zionist regime" as a national and Islamic religious duty. He noted that Zionism was bent on world domination, and that therefore standing against the Zionist regime was an interest shared by all the countries in the world. Ahmadinejad further added that the Zionist regime would not last and would soon come to an end. According to Ahmadinejad, Israel is daily perpetrating serious crimes against the Palestinians, and the Zionists are also involved in destabilizing Iraq, Afghanistan, and Sudan. Israelis' only hope, said the president of Iran, was to recognize the rights of the Palestinian people and return to their countries of origin.

Ahmadinejad once again addressed the issue of the Holocaust, saying it was an excuse used by the West to establish the State of Israel. According to Ahmadinejad, the State of Israel was founded upon lies and falsehoods, and the Holocaust had nothing to do with the "occupation of Palestine". If the Holocaust did take place, the president of Iran said, why wouldn't Western countries allow an investigation of that event, and even if it did occur, responsibility for it lies with Western governments, and the Palestinian people should not pay the price or bear the responsibility for a mistake made by the Europeans and the West.

Ahmadinejad added that Zionists were not religious people and should not be treated as Jews or Christians. Their goal is to destroy the world's monotheistic religions, Zionism being a symbol of hate, racism, and discrimination. The president of Iran also lashed out against Western governments for supporting Israel and ignoring violations of Palestinians' human rights. The West, said Ahmadinejad, is setting the stage for Zionism to infiltrate the world. Today, the Zionists control the fates of European and American governments; accordingly, Western governments are required to protect the Zionists and some of those governments even pay them bribe. He also called on Arab countries to sever their ties with Israel and unite in the struggle against the Zionist regime.

Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami also lashed out against Israel and the West in his sermon. He criticized the US president's plan for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, calling it "treacherous". That plan, said Khatami, is worse than the previous peace plans for solving the Middle East conflict, and does not provide a solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees or to the issue of Jerusalem. Those who support it betray the Palestinian cause, the senior conservative cleric said.

This year, however, the Qods Day events also reflected the severe political crisis which emerged as a result of the publication of Iran's presidential election results. In the weeks preceding Qods Day, reformist bloc leaders and activists called on the Iranian masses to turn that day into a show of strength for the reformist opposition and to take to the streets to express their protest against the regime.



www.peykeiran.com

And indeed, while some demonstrated to show support for the Palestinians and chanted slogans against Israel and the US, tens of thousands of people in Tehran and in other main cities also protested against the authorities. Reformist demonstrators, carrying flags and wearing the trademark green color of the reformist opposition movement, chanted slogans against the regime and the government. Among other things, the anti-government protesters chanted "No Gaza, no Lebanon, my life only for Iran", "Guns, tanks, and Basij militia men are not effective anymore", and "Death to the dictator". Another slogan directed at President Ahmadinejad was "Liar, go to hell".

During the day, Iran's security forces engaged in several violent clashes with the reformist protesters. The clashes continued even after the Qods Day rallies ended, with the security forces using tear gas against the protesters in some places. Several protesters were injured in the clashes and at least 35 were arrested.

Reformist bloc leaders, including former president Mohammad Khatami and the two reformist presidential candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi also took part in the Tehran demonstrations. The chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who for the first time did not lead the Qods Day Friday sermon in Tehran University, participated as well. During the demonstrations, a group of protesters attacked Mohammad Khatami, knocking off his headdress and forcing him to leave the scene. Mir-Hossein Mousavi was also attacked by protesters who shouted insults and even threw objects at him.



The Supreme Leader's authority continues to erode: clerics challenge Khamenei's ruling about the end of the month of Ramadan

In light of Iran's ongoing political crisis, this week Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's ruling about the date of the last day of the month of Ramadan became politically meaningful.

Last Saturday (September 19), Khamenei ruled that Saturday was the last day of the month of Ramadan and that Eid al-Fitr would be observed on Sunday. In contrast, many of Iran's senior Shi'ite clerics issued rulings contrary to Khamenei's, saying that the last day of Ramadan was Sunday and that Eid al-Fitr would be observed on Monday. The senior clerics who ruled contrary to the Supreme Leader's ruling included Hossein Ali Montazeri, Yusef Sane'i, Asadollah Bayat Zanjani, Abdolkarim Mousavi Ardebili, Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani, Naser Makarem Shirazi, and Hossein Nouri Hamadani.

It should be noted that in previous years there have also been religious-legal disagreements about the end of the month-long fast. This year, however, that disagreement became a politically charged issue and was even viewed by some as a challenge by some of the senior clerics to Khamenei's leadership, and their attempt to demonstrate the religious establishment's independence from the Supreme Leader. Recent years have witnessed erosion in the status of Iran's religious establishment while other political elements have

grown more powerful—a prime example is the Revolutionary Guards, supported by Khamenei.

Rah-e Sabz (“Green Path”), a website associated with the supporters of reformist leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, has reported this week on the disagreements between the Supreme Leader and senior clerics on that religious-legal issue, criticizing Khamenei’s ruling. The website said that several hours before the Supreme Leader declared Sunday to be Eid al-Fitr, the institution in charge of watching the moon (for determining the first day of the new Muslim month) said that the chance of seeing the new moon on Saturday night was slim, and that Sunday would therefore be set as the last day of Ramadan. The website went on to say that in recent years Khamenei’s rulings on the end of the month of Ramadan have often been contrary to the position of most senior clerics, arguing that, being the “guardian jurispudent”, his ruling was binding.

The website also reported that, despite Khamenei’s ruling, most Iranians continued fasting on Sunday, embracing the ruling of the majority of senior Shi’ite clerics, who did not agree with the ruling issued by the Supreme Leader. Many Iranians even criticized the Supreme Leader’s ruling, comparing it to bad political decisions made by Khamenei in the last several months, including his decision to congratulate Ahmadinejad for his victory in the presidential elections shortly after the controversial election results were published (www.rahesabz.net, September 20).

Wave of assassinations of senior officials in Iranian Kurdistan

Mamousta Mohammad Sheikholeslam, the representative of Kurdistan Province in the Assembly of Experts, was assassinated last Thursday (September 17) in the city of Sanandaj, the capital of Kurdistan Province. The assembly member was shot dead by a group of unidentified individuals outside his house (Fars, September 17). Two days later (September 19), assassins shot dead Mehdi Takhtfirouz, chief of the Sanandaj city council (Peyk-e Iran, September 19). This week’s two assassinations join three other assassinations which took place in the past two weeks in Iran’s north-western Kurdistan Province.

On September 9, Mehdi Kamyabi, a judge who served as assistant general prosecutor in the court of Sanandaj, survived an assassination attempt when a group of masked gunmen fired several shots at the judge, injuring him (IRNA, September 9). Assassinated several days later (September 12) was Mamousta Borhan Ali, the Friday prayer leader in one of the mosques of Sanandaj. The Sunni cleric was shot dead by gunmen at the entrance to his house upon returning from the mosque. Fars news agency reported that during Iran’s last presidential campaign, the cleric supported Ahmadinejad (Fars, September 13). Four days after that, on

September 16, yet another judge survived an assassination attempt. Hassan Davtalab, who was also an assistant general prosecutor in Sanandaj, was shot by gunmen outside his house.

Ali Akbar Garusi, the head of the legal department in Kurdistan Province, said in an interview granted to the Tabnak news website last week that in the wake of the wave of assassinations, special teams of the interior security forces, the Intelligence Ministry, as well as security and legal elements were established to investigate the incidents. It was his assessment that the assassinations had been carried out by armed separatist groups operating in Kurdistan Province with the cooperation of radical Sunni Muslim groups (Tabnak, September 16). When asked to comment on the wave of assassinations in Kurdistan, Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi said that a government delegation headed by the interior minister and including Revolutionary Guards members would depart for Kurdistan this week on the president's orders to investigate the recent events (Fars, September 19).

This week the conservative daily Keyhan blamed the Israeli Mossad for the recent assassinations. According to the daily, Mossad operates in the region using an espionage and intelligence center it had established in Iraqi Kurdistan (Keyhan, September 19).

Iran is home to about 4.5 million Kurds, most of them living in the provinces of Ilam, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan. About 70 percent of them are of Sunni denomination. In January 2009, Human Rights Watch published a particularly harsh report about the repression of Kurds in Iran. The report documents how Iran's authorities subject the Kurds to political and religious oppression, arguing that the suppression of the Iranian Kurdish minority's rights has intensified in recent years. Among other things, the report addresses the suppression of Kurdish political and student activists, severe restrictions on the freedom of assembly in Kurdish regions, shutting down Kurdish-language dailies and periodicals, banning Kurdish publications, as well as arrests and trials of Kurdish journalists, writers, and publishers on various charges related to compromising state security. The report also mentions the religious discrimination of Sunni Kurds, in which restrictions have been imposed on Sunni religious activity in Kurdish areas and some Kurdish clerics who criticized the government have been arrested.

An Iraqi-based Kurdish resistance known as PJAK (Party for a Free Life) has been operating in Iranian Kurdistan for several years. In recent years, the activities of the resistance have resulted in violent clashes between its operatives and associated smugglers on one hand and Iranian security forces and Revolutionary Guards on the other. In addition, Iran bombarded territories in northern Iraq where PJAK has its bases.

The connection between the Qods Day demonstrations and a soccer game

This week, Iranian media have extensively addressed the question of why didn't Iran's national TV broadcast its usual live coverage of the soccer game held in Tehran last Friday (September 18) between the two popular soccer teams Esteghlal and Estil Azin.

The sports presenter who was supposed to anchor the live coverage apologized to the viewers shortly before the game began, saying that the game would not be broadcasted live due to a "technical malfunction".

Iran's satellite TV network Jam-e Jam aired fragments from the game; those fragments, however, were in black-and-white and the voices of the crowd who attended the game could not be heard. The presenter wrote it off to a malfunction in the only camera sent to Azadi stadium. The next day, Iranian TV broadcasted a report about the game in which color footage was shown.



Black-and-white footage from the game on Iranian TV
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-L-4TfkR2A>)

ISNA and Mehr news agencies reported (September 19) that the Iranian Broadcasting Service had decided not to show a live coverage of the game after the Esteghlal sports club rejected its request to postpone the game by a few minutes due to the "fatigue of the cameramen" working for the service, who had to cover the Qods Day rallies earlier that day.

Websites associated with the reformist opposition also rejected the broadcasting authority's claim about a "technical malfunction" during the broadcast of the game; they did provide, however, another explanation why the game was not aired in real time. According to those websites, the broadcasting service decided to censor the game due to the presence of reformist opposition activists in the stadium during the game, fearing that the game would be used for a show of strength by the opposition supporters (www.rahesabz.net, September 19).

It should be mentioned that in the height of the riots which broke out in Iran in June following the publication of the election results, Iran was in turmoil when its national soccer team players showed up to the Asian World Cup qualifying game against the South Korean team with green wristbands, the color of the reformist opposition. The players were suspended from the team following that incident.

Iranians also send their holiday wishes by SMS: 91 million text messages in 24 hours

Davoud Zareian, the PR manager of Iran Telecommunication Company, said this week that during Eid al-Fitr (celebrated last Sunday), Iranians sent 91 million text messages using their cell phones. He noted that 97 percent of the text messages had reached their destinations successfully.

Despite the large number of text messages sent this year, this figure reflects a considerable drop compared to the record set during last year's Eid al-Fitr: 200 million text messages (Jomhuri-ye Eslami, September 22).

Iran is considered a global text messaging power. In early 2009, Iran's Communications Minister said that 70-80 million text messages were sent in Iran every day.

The growing phenomenon of text messaging is sometimes criticized by Iran's conservative circles, who warn against its negative impact on Iranian society and call for increased government control on the contents of the messages. Indeed, in recent years the Iranian authorities have stepped up their efforts to monitor text messaging contents as part of a campaign to enforce Islamic social code. Last year, the director of Iran Telecommunication Company even announced that the company intended to give incentives to those who would provide information about users who send "immoral" text messages through their cell phones.

Text messaging in Iran is also commonly used for political purposes. During Iran's last several election campaigns, the use of text messages became so widespread that the telecommunication company was instructed by the authorities to block the option of sending text messages to cell phones through the Internet during the days of election propaganda in order to prevent political messages from being sent simultaneously to large numbers of subscribers. Also, during the riots which broke out following the last presidential elections,

Iran's authorities imposed severe restrictions on sending text messages and even completely blocked text messaging for several days.

Picture of the week: school year begins in Iran

Over 13.5 million students started the new school year in Iran this week. The number of students has dropped by 10 percent compared to last year. Over 100,000 schools will operate across Iran this year.

