



### Highlights of the week

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### The student vs. the ayatollah: a math student stood up to the Supreme Leader, criticizing him during a meeting in Tehran

Mahmoud Vahidnia, a math student in Tehran's Sharif University of Technology, became the talk of the day in Iran last week after he faced the Supreme Leader and strongly criticized the

regime's conduct in the past several months. The incident took place at a meeting held on Wednesday between Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and outstanding students and academia members.

The honors student, who won a gold medal in the International Mathematical Olympiad two years ago, asked to say a few words without prior coordination with those who had organized the event. Once the Supreme Leader let him speak, Vahidnia launched into a strongly critical speech against the conduct of the regime.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyMavmZD6TU>

Early in his speech, the student complained about the way meeting participants were chosen to present their questions to the Supreme Leader. He then fiercely criticized Iran's broadcasting authority, accusing it of a twisted portrayal of Iranian and world events, and saying it did not allow people with different worldviews to express their opinions. Vahidnia argued that the Supreme Leader, who appoints the broadcasting authority chief, was responsible for its biased coverage, unless he had lost control of the broadcasting authority.

The student went on to discuss the restrictions imposed on voicing criticism against the Supreme Leader. He noted that, in recent years, he had not seen even one article criticizing Khamenei in the Iranian press. He said that, whether in public or through the Assembly of Experts, making such criticism was impossible. The leader can make mistakes just like any other human being, Vahidnia said, and it should be possible to criticize him instead of idolizing him, like many of his close associates do. He noted that an inability to voice criticism against the leadership could be the cause of hatred and discord.

At that point, the event administration requested the student to finish his speech; however, he then addressed Khamenei and received his permission to continue talking. Vahidnia criticized the security forces' use of brute force and violence during the events which followed the presidential elections, saying it was detrimental to the unity of the Iranian people. Some

students who took part in the convention encouraged and supported Vahidnia during his speech, while others booed him.

After the end of the speech, the Supreme Leader addressed the student's claims. First, the Supreme Leader noted that he was pleased with the criticism made by the student, and that he welcomed it. Khamenei said that he was never opposed to criticism against him, and that such criticism was, indeed, voiced. He noted that the fact that it was he who appointed the Iranian broadcasting authority chief did not mean that he was satisfied with all the programs aired by the authority. According to Khamenei, he cannot monitor all programs, and indeed the broadcasting authority does not always provide a truthful picture of the happenings in Iran. He further stated that the great progress made in Iran was not always reflected in the programs of the broadcasting authority, and that if it was, young Iranians would have more love for their country, the religion, and the regime (Alef, October 29; Rae-ye Sabz, October 31).

Following the incident, which was also reported on the official website of the Supreme Leader, some reformist media reported that the student was arrested by the internal security forces after the meeting, but that report was later denied by Vahidnia himself (Alef, October 30).

### **The question of relations with the US is cropping up once again ahead of the anniversary of the US embassy takeover in Tehran**

The anniversary of the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran (November 4, 1979) reignited the ongoing internal debate in Iran about the future of Iran-US relations.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei addressed the issue of the relations between the two countries last week, saying that Iran rejected any kind of dialogue with the US whose outcome was predetermined by the latter. In a meeting with students in Tehran, Khamenei said that a dialogue with its outcome predetermined by the US could be likened to a relationship between a wolf and a sheep, which was rejected at the time by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic revolution. In the last eight months, Khamenei said, the US acted contrary to President Obama's promises. Obama discussed at length the need to start a new chapter in US-Iran relations and cooperate with it in solving world issues. Iran decided to wait for the promised change, but it never came. The Americans talk about the need for negotiations with Iran, while threatening it in case the negotiations fail. Khamenei noted that while the American administration persisted with its threats and arrogance, the Iranian people would not give up their independence, liberty, rights, and national interests (various news agencies, November 3).

Earlier last week, judiciary chief Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani also addressed the issue of talks between Iran and the US, saying that the decision on Iran-US relations rested with the Supreme Leader, and that on several occasions the latter had expressed his views on that subject, according to which there is nothing to prevent, in principle, a relationship between the two countries. Larijani stressed, however, that according to the Supreme Leader, the US must actually change its policy towards Iran if it is indeed interested in establishing relations with Tehran. He noted that Iran's relations with other countries were based on its national interests, and that talks with the US had to be approached with the fitting caution (Fars, November 1).

On the other hand, other Iranian conservatives expressed strong doubts about holding talks and establishing relations with the US. For example, two members of the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Committee spoke out against the establishment of relations with the US. In an interview granted to conservative daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami last week, Javad Jahangirzadeh said that since there was no change in the imperialistic nature of the US, the idea of reestablishing relations with it was naïve. In the last thirty years, the conservative Majles member said, the US had taken every opportunity to hurt Iran. It is naïve to think that now that Obama is the president of the US, Iran must change its policy towards that country. The Supreme Leader stressed once again that the US was Iran's number one enemy; therefore, as long as the US has not changed its imperialistic policy towards world nations, including Iran, and compensated Iran for its past mistakes, there is no point in establishing relations between the two countries. Majles member Hossein Sobhaninia also noted in an interview granted to Jomhuri-ye Eslami that the views of President Obama did not reflect any change in the US policy towards the Middle East and Iran, and that the US actually persisted with its policy of anti-Iranian sanctions and with supporting radical anti-revolutionary groups working against Iran (Jomhuri-ye Eslami, November 1).

An editorial published early last week in Jomhuri-ye Eslami (November 2) claims that the American administration's decision the week before to allocate 55 million dollars for "assistance to victims of censorship in Iran" expressed the continuation of President Bush's anti-Iranian, imperialistic policy. The daily called upon all Iranian factions that are loyal to the revolution to take part in the November 4 demonstrations, to chant "death to America", and to strive to thwart American schemes and strengthen Iran's national unity.

Conservative daily Jam-e Jam also called for the continuation of the struggle against the US. An editorial published by the daily on November 2 claims that in the past thirty years, the US has only stepped up its policy of sanctions and threats against Iran and its support of the

opposition. The US never recognized the legitimacy of the Iranian regime, continued meddling in Iran's internal affairs, and created conflicts between Iran and its neighbors. As long as the US does not change its policy, recognize the Iranian regime and Iranians' right to determine their own destiny, the slogan "death to America" will continue to resonate with Iranians. That is Iran's strategy, and no government has the right to cross that red line with regard to the US.

Also, Alireza Araninejad, chairman of the Islamic Students Association, said during a convention of Islamic students organizations in Tehran last week that any talks with the "Great Satan" were extremely offensive to the Iranian people, who logically consider the US to be an enemy and see no point in holding negotiations with it. Those interested in holding negotiations with the US, Araninejad said, are thus seeking to lay the groundwork for escalating internal disagreements in Iran and eliminating the unity of the revolution (Fars, November 2).

**In-principle decision by the Regime Expediency Discernment Council: the capital will be relocated from Tehran within about two decades**

Following a meeting attended by expert representatives associated with the Majles and the government, the Regime Expediency Discernment Council approved last week a plan in principle to relocate the capital of Tehran by the completion date of the multi-year program (2005-2025).

According to the proposal, which was approved by the council, the relocation of the capital to a more fitting site will be done in accordance with the goals of municipal planning and with the purpose of contributing to a more correct distribution of the population across Iran. The new site of the capital will be determined according to economic, social, political, cultural, and security considerations.

The suggestion to relocate the capital from Tehran elsewhere has come up on several occasions in the past several years, mostly due to the severe problems of Tehran, mainly its air pollution, its population density and its severe shortage of public transportation, as well as its vulnerability to earthquakes due to its problematic geological location. The proposal to relocate the capital was brought up in the mid-1980s and has been discussed in the Supreme National Security Council and in the Majles in recent years. Following the earthquake which hit the city of Bam in 2003 and which claimed over 30 thousand lives, there have been more and more voices calling for the relocation of the capital, claiming that if a strong earthquake

were to hit Tehran, hundreds of thousands of people will die and about 80 percent of the city's buildings will collapse.

Tehran has experienced a 250 percent population growth since the Islamic revolution. In 1979, at the time of the revolution, Tehran was home to about 5.6 million people; in late 2008 its population exceeded 13.5 million. Different studies done in recent years have shown that the average life expectancy of Tehran residents is five years less than other Iranians, due to the severe environmental problems plaguing the city, mainly the air pollution caused mostly by vehicles. The air pollution is exacerbated by the city's physical location, as the Alborz mountains to the north of Tehran trap the polluted air inside the city itself. The damage caused to Tehran's ecosystem in the last two decades by urban development projects has been a contributing cause to pollution, making Tehran one of the most polluted cities in the world. In recent years, the city has been shut down several times due to abnormal pollution levels. Iranian authorities have tried to combat air pollution by imposing restrictions on the use of private vehicles, expanding the subway system, and minimizing the use of low-quality fuel, but those attempts have failed so far.

Iranian experts have assessed in recent years that the city will become uninhabitable in about ten years due to the intolerable life quality, and that the only solution to Tehran's problems is to declare another city as Iran's capital, following the example of such countries as Australia, Pakistan, and Brazil. Experts say that relocating the capital will curb the continuing immigration into Tehran and help solve its problems.

### **Cleric in each school and separate textbooks for boys and girls: more examples of the increasing Islamization of the education system**

Iran's Deputy Education Minister Ali Asghar Yazdani announced last week that the Education Ministry intended to implement a program to permanently assign clerics in schools, in which at least one cleric will join the teaching staff of every school across Iran. Yazdani noted that the plan, due to begin soon, was being examined by the Education Ministry. He said that the clerics assigned to the schools will be responsible, among other things, for leading school prayers, providing answers to students' questions and issues regarding Islamic law, and organize other cultural and educational activities. It was also reported last week that hundreds of young religion students were assigned to various schools where they would be responsible for organizing religious ceremonies on special occasions.

Reformist daily E'temad questioned the implementation of the plan, saying that similar plans to send thousand of clerics to schools had been drawn up by the Education Ministry in the

past and had never been actually put to practice. In an interview to the daily, one of the experts interviewed for an article regarding that issue said that the feasibility of the plan was highly doubtful, since 97 percent of the current budget of the Education Ministry was tied up in salaries. The expert wondered where Education Ministry officials would find the necessary funds to permanently hire clerics in the numerous schools across Iran, considering the severe economic crisis already suffered by the Iranian education system (E'temad, November 1).



ISNA news agency

Meanwhile, a senior Education Ministry official announced last week that the ministry intended to create separate textbooks for schoolgirls, saying they have special educational needs. As an example, he noted the fact that girls become mature by the age of 9, requiring the educational system to provide a separate curriculum from that followed by their male peers (Khabar Online, November 1).

The Education Ministry's plan to permanently assign clerics in schools and separate between boys' and girls' textbooks is yet another example of the Islamization of Iran's schools and universities, which has recently become all the more pronounced under the leadership of the regime. It should be noted that following a statement made by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who expressed his concern over humanities and liberal arts curricula in Iran's higher education institutions, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution has recently ordered an investigation into university study programs. Also, senior Iranian officials have stressed the need to update school textbooks in order to adapt them to the values of the Islamic revolution.

### **Freedom of the press, Iran-style: authorities shut down yet another reformist daily**

The Press Monitoring Committee of the Islamic Guidance Ministry revoked last week the license of reformist economic daily Sarmayeh. According to an announcement issued by the



Islamic Guidance Ministry, Sarmayah's license was revoked due to its repeated violations of press law, changing the format and size of the newspaper without the approval of the Press Monitoring Committee, and publishing articles falling outside of the newspaper's area of responsibility (society and education) (various news agencies, November 2). Senior members of the Sarmayah staff believe, however, that the license was revoked due to political considerations, namely the newspaper's criticism of President Ahmadinejad and his policy.

Edited by Hossein Abdeh Tabrizi, the daily Sarmayah is considered one of Iran's two major economic dailies. It is associated with the supporters of reformist leader Mir Hossein Mousavi.



Sarmayah's last first page, November 2

The decision to shut down the newspaper was made only one day after Mohammad Ali Ramin, President Ahmadinejad's former press advisor, became deputy minister of Islamic Guidance for media issues.

Numerous reformist newspapers have been shut down by the Islamic Guidance Ministry in recent years. E'temad-e Melli, a newspaper associated with reformist leader Mehdi Karubi, was shut down several months ago. The following newspapers were shut down prior to that: Kalameh Sabz (published on behalf of Mir Hossein Mousavi), Seda-ye Edalat, Farhang Ashti, Sharq, Ham Meyhan, Kargozaran, Tehran Emrouz, as well as such reformist publications as Shahrvand, Haft, and Zanan, a women's magazine.

In a report recently published by Reporters Without Borders, the international organization for press freedom, Iran was ranked 172th out of 175 countries.



**Pictures of the week: reformist oppositionists demonstrate on the anniversary of the US embassy takeover in Tehran**



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