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Spotlight on Iran

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Highlights of the week

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Following Iran's agreement to resume nuclear talks with the West, Iranian media says talks should reflect West's recognition of Iran's power

In a letter sent by Supreme National Security Council secretary Sa'id Jalili to EU Foreign Affairs High Representative Catherine Ashton last week, Iran said it was willing to resume nuclear talks with the G5+1 (U.S., Britain, France, Russia, China, and Germany) starting November 10. The talks between Iran and the West over the Iranian nuclear program were terminated in October 2009.

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast announced this week that Iran had repeatedly expressed willingness to resume negotiations with the West and had already clarified its position on the principles on which such negotiations should be based. He noted that both parties had yet to agree on the time and location of the talks, as well as the issues to be discussed. Mehmanparast said that better results could be expected if more countries joined the negotiations (ISNA, October 31).

The president also addressed the resumption of the talks in an interview given this week to Iranian TV. Ahmadinejad said that the sanctions imposed on Iran by the West were doomed to failure, and that the West realized that it had no alternative but to engage in negotiations. He stressed once again that Iran was willing to hold talks based on the principles of justice and honor, and that it would not concede to all Western demands. If the West shows hostility towards Iran and is unwilling to act in accordance with international law, it would affect Iran's conduct in its negotiations with the G5+1 (various news agencies, October 30). In an interview to Fars News Agency, the president's senior advisor Ali-Akbar Javanfekr said that Iran had no intention of negotiating on its nuclear program in the coming November talks. He said that the G5+1 first had to answer Iran's questions about the aims of the talks and the nuclear weapons held by Israel (Fars, October 31).

Following Iran's agreement to resume negotiations with the West, government-affiliated media claimed this week that the resumption of the talks reflected the West's recognition of Iran's power, a recognition that the talks must reflect. The conservative daily *Siyasat-e Ruz* argued that the West must engage in trust-building measures towards Iran to ensure the success of the negotiations. The G5+1 countries must display their good intentions towards Iran, to accept responsibility for the failure of previous talks held between the two parties, and to eliminate the atmosphere of distrust between Iran and the West. The West must also admit that the sanctions imposed on Iran were illegal and acknowledge Iran's right for nuclear technology as a foundation for conducting the negotiations (*Siyasat-e Ruz*, October 30).

Several commentators interviewed by the daily expressed their views that the talks should be held on the basis of the West's willingness to recognize Iran's rights and unique position. Dr. Seyyed Reza Sadr al-Hosseini noted that Iran's internal strength, the warm welcome given to President Ahmadinejad during his visit to Lebanon, and his UN Security Council address gave Iran a special position that should be reflected in any negotiations with the West. After the loading of fuel into the Bushehr nuclear reactor, Iran became, in fact, a nuclear state, and the West's recognition of that reality paved the way for the resumption of talks with it. It was his assessment that, other than the nuclear program, Iran would raise further issues during

the negotiations, including Israel's nuclear capabilities and the right of other countries to possess nuclear technology. Dr. Mohammad Sadeq Koushaki claimed that the West must acknowledge that the nuclear program is a domestic Iranian issue in which the West therefore has no right to intervene. The monitoring of Iran's nuclear activity must be carried out solely by the IAEA, in accordance with professional and legal considerations (Siyasat-e Ruz, October 31).

The commentator Mehdi Mohammadi also argued that the West should meet Iran halfway, as the latter expressed willingness to resume talks on its nuclear program. In an interview to Fars, a conservative news agency, the international affairs expert said that the West, having acknowledged the failure of the sanctions against Iran, came to the realization that it had no other recourse but to hold talks with it. He noted that Iran had expressed willingness to resume the negotiations based on the letter sent by Jalili to Ashton on July 6, and that Ashton had expressed no reservations over the letter. This means that the talks resume on the basis of Iran's demand to clarify several issues ahead of the actual resumption: namely, Western countries must explain their intentions towards Iran and the purpose of the negotiations, as well as their stance on the nuclear weapons held by Israel (Fars, October 30).

Meanwhile, the daily Keyhan claimed this week that the nuclear program could not be the only issue to be discussed in the Iran-G5+1 talks, saying that only the IAEA should be dealing with the nuclear program. An editorial published by the daily says that, in the past, the West would settle for no less than the complete halt of uranium enrichment and the shutdown of Iran's nuclear facilities. Nowadays, thanks to Iran's strategy of resistance and firm stand, Western countries consider the very resumption of negotiations to be a significant achievement and are forced to accept the reality of Iran as a nuclear state. Furthermore, Iran no longer needs the deal offered by the West last year to supply enriched nuclear fuel for the nuclear reactor in Tehran in exchange for sending most of the enriched uranium from Iran to a third country, since it will soon be able to produce the necessary materials for the reactor's operation on its own (Keyhan, November 1).

The daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami also addressed the resumption of talks between Iran and the West, claiming that the history of the negotiations with the G5+1 countries was a reflection of Western strategy, based on exerting pressure on Iran. If the West persists with that policy, the daily claimed, it will once again be responsible for the failure of the talks (Jomhuri-ye Eslami, November 1).

Revolutionary Guards periodical accuses President Ahmadinejad of misrepresenting remarks made by Islamic revolution founder

In an unusual move, Payam-e Enghelab, a monthly published on behalf of the Supreme Leader's representative in the Revolutionary Guards, strongly criticized President Ahmadinejad for his recent remarks about the status of the Majles.

In an interview given by the president to the daily Iran Emrouz this past September, Ahmadinejad claimed that the Majles was no longer at the center of state affairs. The president was referring to a statement made at the time by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic revolution, about the supreme authority of the Majles to manage state affairs. According to Ahmadinejad, Khomeini's statement was relevant back when the executive branch was headed by a prime minister approved by the Majles rather than a president elected by the people. Accordingly, it is now the executive branch, headed by the president, that is at the center of state affairs, rather than the Majles.

The president's remarks were made on the backdrop of his power struggles with the Majles, that have considerably escalated in recent months. Among other things, the president accused the Majles of overstepping its authority and passing laws contradictory to the constitution and to Islamic religious law, while Majles members accused the president of illegally interfering with the legislation process. The president's statement sparked an outrage among Majles members. In response, 170 Majles members sent a strongly-worded letter of protest accusing the president of undermining the status of the legislative branch, demanding that he focus on his own responsibilities.



President Ahmadinejad and Revolutionary Guards chief Mohammad Ali Jafari
(www.parsine.com, an Iranian news website)

In the latest issue of Payam-e Enghelab, published last week, the official Revolutionary Guards periodical claimed that the president's remarks were an offense against the current and past leaders of the Islamic republic, and that the misrepresentation of Khomeini's statement for political interests was a serious mistake. According to the monthly, whose criticism against the president was quoted on several Iranian news websites, the president's

remarks undermine the status of the Majles and do not contribute to the promotion of state affairs. Even if his interpretation of Khomeini's statement was true, the newspaper said, that would not imply that the government may do as it pleases and ignore the law. Even if it is the government that is at the center of state affairs, it does not give it the right to contradict the law and ignore the demands of Majles members who have the authority to impeach the president.

The monthly even accused the president of misrepresenting Khomeini's remarks, claiming that the only one who could interpret and analyze the statement made by the founder of the revolution was the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Iran and the Iranian people have no use for the president's comments, the monthly argued, further adding that they are detrimental to state affairs since they only contribute to internal power struggles. Rather than dealing with the problems of the people, those in charge are involved in internal power struggles that do not contribute to the promotion of state affairs (Jaras, November 2).

President orders propping up of rial against economists' recommendations

President Ahmadinejad instructed Mahmoud Bahmani, the governor of the Central Bank of Iran, to take the necessary measures to increase the exchange rate of the Iranian rial compared to the dollar. In a TV interview given last week, Ahmadinejad claimed that, given Iran's considerable foreign currency reserves, the local currency must be strengthened and its exchange rate should become higher than it is now (Mehr, October 30). The president also ordered the establishment of a special committee to determine the real value of the rial's exchange rate. Mehr news agency reported that members of the committee will include experts from the Central Bank, the Finance and Interest Council, the Majles Economic Committee, and the Headquarters for Economic Transformation (Mehr, November 1).

Last week, the president claimed that Iran had upwards of 100 billion dollars in foreign currency reserves. The governor of the Central Bank also claimed recently that Iran had been able to increase its foreign currency reserves by importing gold.

In late September, the dollar gained over 10 percent on the Iranian currency and traded at 1,250 tomans. The Central Bank's intervention resulted in the devaluation of the dollar, which has been trading at approximately 1,050 tomans in the past several days.

In recent years Iranian economists have criticized the Central Bank's policy, claiming it was keeping the rial artificially high. Iranian manufacturers and exporters have also asked the government to devalue the local currency in order to encourage exports. The economic daily

Donya-ye Eqtesad (“World of Economy”) strongly criticized the president’s instruction this week, claiming it blatantly contradicted the recommendations of economists, manufacturers, and exporters. The daily argued that, when the president opened his remarks by discussing the need to adjust the rial’s exchange rate to its real value, some believed that his intention was to devalue the Iranian currency. It soon became apparent, however, that he had just the opposite in mind. According to the daily, the rial-dollar exchange rate is already causing damage to manufacturers and exporters and triggering an increase in imports. While internal manufacturing in Iran has decreased in recent years due to the high inflation rate, imports increased due to the exchange rate stability, escalating the economic recession and unemployment. The conclusion is that the exchange rate must be altered and pegged at 1,600 to 1,700 tomans per USD at the very least (Donya-ye Eqtesad, November 1).



This is not the first time that the president has ignored the recommendations of professional economists. For example, in May 2007 the president instructed government-run and private banks to lower the interest rate to 12 percent, while economists and the Finance and Interest Council warned that lowering the interest rate would lead to yet another increase in inflation rate.

Strong criticism and student protests over government’s decision to close down Tehran University of Medical Sciences

Several hundred students demonstrated in Tehran this week over the government’s decision to close down the University of Medical Sciences, one of the capital’s three medical universities. In recent days, the government’s decision and its implementation have been strongly criticized by university lecturers and students and by Majles members.

The sudden announcement was given last weekend by Health Minister Marzieh Vahid Dastjerdi. The Health Ministry said that the decision had to do with the government’s policy to move as many government institutions and as much manpower as possible outside of Tehran. The policy is aimed to reduce the severe congestion in the city and minimize damage

in case of an earthquake. Top Health Ministry officials also claimed that the decision was made following the recent establishment of Alborz Province, split from Tehran Province, and within the framework of structural changes designed to improve Tehran's healthcare system. According to the government's decision, the university students and staff members are to be transferred to the Faculty of Medicine at Tehran University. ILNA news agency reported, however, that Tehran University announced that it was currently unable to receive most of the students who had studied at the now closed university (ILNA, October 31).

The Tehran University of Medical Sciences had 7 faculties, 10 university hospitals, and 16 clinics. It is attended by over 6,000 students and has a staff of about 730 lecturers.

The government's decision drew strong criticism from Majles members who claimed that it caught them unaware and that they only learned about it from the media. Health Committee member Ali-Reza Marandi defined it as illegal and announced that the Majles members would fight the decision, which, according to Marandi, is an offense against the Majles. He rejected the reasons given by the government for closing down the university, saying they were unconvincing (Aftab, October 31). In a special session held this week, the Health Committee decided to summon the Health Minister to respond to committee members' questions about the decision to close down the university.



The Tehran University of Medical Sciences

Ali Abbaspour Tehrani-Fard, head of the Majles Education and Research Committee, criticized the decision as well, saying that establishing or closing down a university required the approval of the Majles. He noted that the closed-down university was a prestigious academic institution with a long history, and that the government could not suddenly decide to close it down (Aftab, November 1).

A senior member of the university board also said that the decision was illegal, claiming that closing universities in this manner was unprecedented in the world. He further added that the

university board was also unaware of the decision, and that he himself had found out about it from a text message received late at night (Mehr, October 31).

Pictures of the week: one hundred contestants take part in 500-meter long Sudoku competition in Tehran's Amirkabir University



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