SWP Comments

Stiftung
Wissenschaft und
Politik

German Institute
for International and
Security Affairs

Foreign Minister Mottaki Dismissed and Salehi Installed

New Trends in Iranian Diplomacy before Istanbul Nuclear Talks

Walter Posch

In December 2010, Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki was dismissed. His dismissal is part of a recent pattern of replacements and new appointments in the foreign policy institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. With this personnel policy, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad is trying essentially to achieve two aims: to secure a position as one of the most important politicians of the Iranian right wing ("osulgara", "Principalists") and to gain more influence over Iran's foreign policy apparatus. At the same time, these changes in foreign policy signal a move towards de-escalation, by which the Iranians were hoping to create a positive political atmosphere at the nuclear negotiations in Istanbul, which recently took place in Istanbul on January 20–21.

Manuchehr Mottaki was removed from office in a less than graceful way – during an official visit to Senegal. Embarrassingly enough, it was his hosts who informed him of his dismissal.

In general, Mottaki is said to be a cautious politician who maintained good contacts within the government, the parliament (read: the political factions within the Principalists), and the highest echelons of the system, namely the office of Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, Iran's ultimate power holder. Having direct access to this office is perhaps the best definition of what it means to be a "heavyweight" politician in the Islamic Republic. At the same time, Mottaki wisely stayed away from political infighting and weighed his words carefully before commenting on domestic political issues. As a result, he enjoyed almost unanimous support in the parliament. Yet, it was these connections that made Ahmadinejad suspicious of Mottaki.

On the factional level, it is noteworthy that the foreign ministry has its *éminence grise*, in this case it is former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, who is still advisor to the Supreme Leader in foreign policy affairs. Velayati was rumoured to have contemplated a run against Ahmadinejad in the last presidential election. This detail is important because, unlike any other candidate from the right wing, Velayati would have stood a real chance of prevailing against Ahmadinejad.

Dr. Walter Posch is a researcher at SWP's Middle East and Africa Division

Already in 2007, when Ahmadinejad replaced Ali Ardashir Larijani as the Secretary General of the Higher National Security Council (HNSC), his ambitions went beyond just installing Saeed Jalili – he was also trying to increase his personal influence over the foreign ministry and to destroy Velayati's influence there. In the interim period between the 2008 parliamentary elections that made Larijani Speaker of Parliament and the day Mottaki was replaced, Ahmadinejad's foreign policy power was to a certain degree restrained by criticism from the parliament on one side and tacit obstruction by Velayati and his influence on the foreign ministry's personnel on the other.

Another reason was Mottaki's closeness to Larijani. He was Larijani's campaign manager during the 2005 presidential election when the latter stood against Larijani and Ahmadinejad. Mottaki never cut his relations with Larijani, even after he joined the cabinet of Ahmadinejad, which – according to Iranian sources – he served loyally. This relationship had to arouse Ahmadinejad's suspicion, even more so as Larijani became one of his most outspoken critics.

As such, replacing Mottaki was only a question of time and was directed primarily against both Larijani and Velayati – in other words, against his political competitors. But for Ahmadinejad, this is more than a mere personal affair.

A pattern of replacement

The way Ahmadinejad disposed of those who worked with or for him proves that he is a systematic and thoughtful political operator struggling against huge obstacles created by the regime's political establishment. In this, he is pursuing a clear strategy aimed at two objectives:

- Firstly, to establish himself and his close followers as the main representatives of the neo-fundamentalist right wing.
- Secondly, to make himself the only important politician with exclusive contact and access to the Supreme Leader's office.

He started the implementation of this strategy as soon as he became president in 2005. Immediately after assuming his new role, Ahmadinejad ignored the traditional conservatives' wish to appoint members of their party to cabinet positions. In the summer of the same year, he replaced the nuclear negotiator and general secretary of the HNSC, Hassan Rouhani, with a more radical politician, Ali Ardashir Larijani.

However, it is apparent that Larijani was never meant to be the final replacement, since in 2007 Larijani was, in turn, replaced by Saeed Jalili, a close personal friend and confidant of the president. In the following years, he moved against three politicians – among others – who had access to the Supreme Leader's office, were well-entrenched within the Principalist faction, and belonged to the security and intelligence establishment. The three politicians were: Interior Minister Mostafa Purmohammadi (2008); the retired but still respected former intelligence czar, Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri (2009); and Intelligence Minister Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ezhei (2009).

Interestingly, Iran's contested president remained silent during the first months following his re-election in 2009 – except when he dismissed Mohseni-Ezhei on account of Ezhei's mismanagement during the 2009 crackdown. In other words, whilst all other Principalist factions did their best to sideline Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and to crack down on the reformists, Ahmadinejad was hedging his bets and continued his policy of strengthening his position within the political right.

And finally comes the replacement of Manuchehr Mottaki, which is meaningful in several regards, above all in view of Mottaki's ability to communicate directly with the Supreme Leader's office. Thus, by replacing Mottaki, Ahmadinejad achieved another aim of becoming the sole link between the government and the leadership. But removing a politically well-

entrenched minister like Mottaki was a delicate matter, where much depended on timing.

Mottaki saves the day, but not himself

Some Iranian analysts quite reasonably argue that Ahmadinejad first wanted to replace Mottaki three years ago with someone more to his liking. If this is correct, it would have coincided with the removal of Larijani in 2007. But Larijani's dismissal and other dismissals that took place in 2008 and 2009 and the subsequent restructuring in the ministries concerned consumed too much political energy. Hence, replacing Mottaki had to be postponed.

In 2010, however, Ahmadinejad felt that he had to move. Not only was Mottaki an important minister, he also scored against the president on two important foreign policy points: Ahmadinejad's appointment of "special envoys" and his disastrous Africa policy. The idea of "special envoys" or "special representatives" in foreign policy matters was Ahmadinejad's brainchild. In a nutshell it meant that four long-standing friends of his would be tasked with delicate foreign policy dossiers such as the Middle East, Asia, Afghanistan, and the Caspian Sea. To this, one has to add the fact that the nuclear file falls within the portfolio of Jalili, the secretary general of the HNSC. Hence, not much would seem to be left for the foreign ministry. Indeed, almost all strategic long-term planning would have shifted to the president's bureau and the special representatives. In the end, Ahmadinejad and his circle of friends would have arrogated the power and competences of the foreign ministry.

As soon as these plans became known, they met dramatic resistance. The parliament was not about to allow its right to oversee foreign policy slip away. Opposition mounted also within the Principalist faction, where the president was severely criticised. But most importantly, the Supreme Leader, too, weighed in and made his opinion clear, actually downgrading the all-powerful special representatives to ordinary presidential advisors and explicitly restoring the importance of the foreign ministry.

But it was the alleged special representatives themselves who most harmed their own cause. For instance, when one of them remarked critically on the Turkish Genocide perpetrated against the Armenians during the First World War (1914–18) it was Mottaki – a Turkish speaker – who had to ease tensions with Ankara, an indispensable partner for Iran. This episode exposed a dramatic lack of diplomatic professionalism of the special representatives to the watchful eyes of the Iranian public as well as within the Principalist faction. Mottaki's and the foreign ministry's position was therefore publicly strengthened. If Ahmadinejad wanted to tighten his grip on the foreign ministry, he had to move sooner rather than later. The situation got even worse when the Islamic Republic suffered one of its most dramatic diplomatic defeats in Africa: in November 2010 Nigerian authorities discovered a substantial Iranian shipment of arms bound for Gambia. The ensuing diplomatic row resulted in the breaking off or downgrading of the level of diplomatic relations with some 20 African countries. Once again, it was Mottaki who had to set things straight.

The final decision to relieve Mottaki from his position must have been taken sometime in summer 2010 after Mottaki had made a critical remark about one of the special representatives. The decision was obviously related to the Manama Dialogue Conference Dinner on 3 December 2010, in which Mottaki attended the speech of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Mottaki had to defend his decision to remain in the room after Clinton began speaking against hard-line critics. But many analysts in Tehran took a cautiously positive approach to Clinton's remarks. And Ahmadinejad picked up on that impression, obviously hoping for a positive round, if not a breakthrough, in the recent Istan-

bul talks. But, in case there was indeed a small chance for success in the negotiations, then Ahmadinejad did not want a person in his cabinet who would be strong on his own account.

Salehi installed but "advisors" remain

The appointment of Ali Akbar Salehi as caretaker foreign minister was one of Ahmadinejad's smartest moves – for domestic, institutional, and foreign policy reasons.

To begin with, Salehi is a technocrat; his core expertise is that of a nuclear scientist as well as that of a diplomat. Salehi served Iran as ambassador to the IAEA and later became head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO), a position he still holds. As a diplomat he was employed at the Iranian consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Considering his political affiliations, he is closer to reformist than fundamentalist circles. Quite surprisingly, these political affiliations did not harm him in the eyes of the president. On the contrary, Ahmadinejad's style of personnel policy – where individual and personal relations count more than political convictions – must have made Salehi a preferable candidate for the position of foreign minister, unlike Mottaki, whose excellent connections to the highest echelons of the regime and the parliament Iran's president found so troublesome.

Salehi's independence from any of the neo-fundamentalist powerhouses allows for smooth cooperation with Jalili on both personal and institutional grounds: on personal grounds because there is no competition between Jalili and Salehi; institutionally, because nothing much has changed: Salehi is already involved in the nuclear decision-making processes as head of the IAEO. Hence Salehi will not only continue to contribute real expertise to the negotiations, but his new upgraded position will give him more gravitas since he will be able to draw on the ministry's expertise. This, in turn, will increase the role of the ministry in the negotiations by further adding its much needed foreign policy experience to the political clout of the HNSC.

By sacking Mottaki, Ahmadinejad was able to have his cake and eat it too. On the one hand, he strengthened his grip on the political right. On the other hand, appointing a technocrat as caretaker minister to the foreign ministry guarantees the ministry works smoothly. At the same time, without parliamentary confirmation, Salehi remains merely a caretaker without any political support who is dependent solely on the will of the president. Therefore, Salehi's nomination as caretaker does not mean the president has forgotten about his vision of a new streamlined foreign policy apparatus. On the contrary, after the Supreme Leader prevented the instalment of presidential special representatives by downgrading them to mere advisors, Ahmadinejad countered by nominating two more "special advisors" on foreign policy issues: one for Latin America and one for Africa. In other words, in adapting to changed circumstances, Ahmadinejad has preserved the impetus of his original idea.

For example, in tasking his advisors with missions to foreign countries, he stripped the foreign ministry of any leading role. In other words, Ahmadinejad wants his "special advisors" to act as if they are, in fact, special representatives. But his advisors are not the only ones to conduct important missions for the Islamic Republic! With regards to bilateral relations with Turkey, the Supreme Leader preferred to send his own advisor – Velayati – to Erdogan. Velayati was to express the leadership's hope of closer regional cooperation with Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. And in Iraq, Khamenei tasked Salehi to deliver a confidential message to Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Hussaini Sistani.

This puts Salehi in a delicate situation. After all, his president scorns anything less than direct relations with the Supreme Leader's office. In any case, the president's preference for special advisors in almost all

salient foreign policy domains is a serious challenge for the new minister. It will require significant political tact and sensitivity for Salehi to strengthen his ministry's role and convince the president's advisors to better coordinate with Iran's diplomatic corps in order to avoid any future diplomatic faux pas. So, whereas the appointment of Salehi will most certainly strengthen the Islamic Republic's diplomats in the nuclear realm, it remains to be seen whether the same can be said in relation to other foreign policy areas.

A new style in foreign policy

Appointing Salehi – a technocrat who Ahmadinejad had personally sacked in 2005 for being too soft in defending Iran's "undeniable nuclear rights" – demonstrates a desire to pursue de-escalation, both domestically and with the international community.

Domestically, Ahmadinejad did not care about the radical neo-fundamentalists who were upset when Iran signed the Additional Protocol in 2003. On the contrary, he appointed the very man who signed the Additional Protocol – Salehi – to the position of foreign minister. But this also means that, with regard to the international community, Ahmadinejad is willing to take a more constructive path, at least regarding style.

This also holds true for regional policy. Salehi's first official statement – in which he underscored the importance of Turkey and Saudi Arabia for Iran – showed a much needed appreciation of political realities. The importance of Turkey is beyond debate in Iran, but this cannot be said about Saudi Arabia, which is Iran's most significant competitor in the region. By appointing Salehi, who uttered benign remarks towards the Wahhabi kingdom, Ahmadinejad distanced himself from the most radical voices of the political right in Tehran – the majority of them simultaneously scorn Arabs, Saudis, Sunnis, and Wahhabis.

Another detail corroborates this cautious positive trend: the president's sacking in December 2010 of Mohammad Ali Ramin, who is one of the organisers of the "Holocaust conference". This means that Tehran's subculture of Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis and their Western friends now lacks any backing in the system. Thus, this decision offers more proof of the president's intent to move towards de-escalation. What a difference four years can make: in 2006 the president offered Ramin and his kindred spirits an international stage, whereas in 2010 a lot of them were expelled while the president simultaneously promoted technocratic talent to high positions.

Implications for the nuclear talks

What do these changes imply for the future of the nuclear talks?

First, there is Iran's *willingness to negotiate*, as illustrated at the December 2010 Geneva talks. Currently, there are no signs that this willingness will abate. On the contrary, the signals Ahmadinejad has sent out – like the January 2011 offer to allow some IAEA members to visit Iran's nuclear facilities or the bombastic declaration that the country now produces its own fuel rods – are intended to be positive signs. In principle, they aim to create a positive domestic atmosphere in the run-up to the talks in Istanbul, scheduled for 20–22 January 2011. However, a willingness to negotiate in principle does not equal a willingness to compromise. Still, Ahmadinejad has obviously grasped the necessity of negotiations as well as the need to create a benign political atmosphere in order to succeed. The selection of a moderate caretaker foreign minister and the explicit wish to normalise relations with Saudi Arabia – one of the West's most important allies in the region – clearly demonstrate this change of style, if not of substance.

Second, once set on the negotiations track, Ahmadinejad *has braved resistance within the system.* His willingness to find a nego-

tiated solution to the nuclear file is well-known, and politicians like Larijani and Mir Hossein Musavi even criticised the president's "soft" stance on the nuclear issue after the first Geneva talks in October 2009. Other forces opposing the deal are active, as proven by the last bomb attacks against nuclear scientists in the heart of Tehran – one of them was a friend and former student of Salehi's. The president and his followers accused the perpetrators of being enemies of a peaceful, negotiated solution to the nuclear file. Of course, the Iranians were also quick to accuse the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom of being responsible but, even so, they ultimately came to the negotiating table and this is what counts.

Third, there should be no illusions that *Ahmadinejad is pursuing a grand bargain* that would allow him not only to crush the domestic opposition (this happened already with the Islamist Left/Green Movement) but also to *strengthening his own position*, both personally and institutionally, and to strengthen Iran's regional position. Renowned scholars like Farideh Farhi have already commented critically on the high domestic costs of such a deal (e.g., human rights violations) and both domestic and international resistance to it.

Fourth, *can Ahmadinejad deliver?* The answer is yes, under current circumstances he is the only viable partner through whom a negotiated solution can be achieved. After all, he is willing to take personal risks and, as we have seen, he is also uniquely capable of checking extremely powerful individuals in the regime, thus nullifying their potential power to obstruct. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the Supreme Leader counts on him to find a negotiated solution with the West. Besides, many of those regime heavyweights Ahmadinejad has sidelined so humiliatingly are concentrating on the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections to challenge him. That means there are at least another three years before he and his followers' positions can be seriously challenged.

For many in the West, the prospect of contributing to the stabilisation of Ahmadinejad's presidency may be inconvenient or even shocking. But this is the reality to live with after both sides missed their opportunity in 2005 with the liberal-minded Islamist President Mohammad Khatami.

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761