

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد
بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

[Asia times Online](#)

Ahmadinejad envoys stir trouble at home

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi
9/10/2010

Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad this week was sent a letter by 122 members of Iran's parliament (Majlis) who, warning him of the perils of "parallelism in foreign policy", asked him to reverse recent appointments of four "special envoys". Unmoved, the president is on the verge of adding two more.

Ahmadinejad's initiative has stirred heated debate in Iran, with some Tehran pundits and lawmakers accusing him of trying to bypass the Foreign Ministry and conduct foreign policy through members of his inner circle. In their correspondence, the Majlis deputies advised Ahmadinejad to "follow the advice of the leader", that is, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's recent statement that the [government](#) should avoid "parallel work in foreign policy".

The special envoys named so far are Rahim Mashai, the president's controversial chief of staff, as envoy for Middle East; Hamid Baghai, the head of Iran's Cultural Heritage Foundation, for Asia; Abulfazl Zohreh-Vand, deputy head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, for [Afghanistan](#); and Mohammad Akhundzadeh for the Caspian Sea. The two more will cover Africa and Central America.

Ahmadinejad's ability to set up these envoys is based on the Islamic constitution, principle 127, and yet a number of his parliamentary critics have labeled this as being contrary to the constitution.

Ahmadinejad is not the first president to appoint special envoys. A precedent dates to the

presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who initiated this foreign policy tradition by selecting one of his close aids, Mahmoud Vaezi, as special envoy on Caspian Sea affairs.

Since the early 1990s, Vaezi and his successors have grappled with the thorny issue of the legal ownership of the Caspian Sea, so far with few tangible results, save marathon negotiations that have remained deadlocked on, among others, the key question of what percentage of the world's biggest lake should be assigned to Iran (with Iran demanding a 20% share while the other four Caspian littoral states lean toward 13%).

In retrospect, carving out a special diplomatic role for Caspian affairs appears to have been a good move, insofar as it equipped the Iranian envoy with a more weighty diplomatic attire, reflecting an apt reaction to similar moves by Russia, whose special envoy on the Caspian Sea wielded a huge influence on Russia's policy in parallel to the country's formal foreign policy machinery. If anything, the experience of both Iran and Russia in the Caspian area shows that foreign policy parallelism can at times be effective and should not be dismissed out of hand, but rather evaluated case-by-case.

One reason why Ahmadinejad's decision on special envoys has been controversial is that Mashai, his moderate chief of staff, is a special target of hardliners who want him out instead of given bigger roles. Another reason is the perceived inappropriateness of the selection of certain individuals, including Mashai and Baghai, who have little or no diplomatic background.

Past known disputes between Zohreh and Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki are another reason why some pundits in Tehran are questioning the wisdom of Ahmadinejad's move, particularly since this could generate new tensions between the president and his foreign minister, who has also openly contested some foreign policy comments by Baghai.

"It is unclear on the basis of what responsibility and what position Mr Baghai has made those inapt statements," Mottaki was quoted in the Iranian press as saying in reference to Baghai's announcement of coming new appointments for special envoys for African and Central America.

Still, irrespective of his displeasure with Baghai's intervention, it is unclear that Mottaki is generally opposed to this initiative that could theoretically add a new layer of foreign policy dynamism if handled properly; that is, with due respect of the side-effects in terms of "overlapping responsibilities".

On September 7, Mottaki warned against the "weakening of Iran's diplomatic apparatus", while the Foreign Ministry has denied reports that Mottaki was prepared to resign over the situation, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported. [1]

"The Foreign Ministry is one of those places - like the Intelligence Ministry - that has always been monitored by Khamenei, who has placed loyalists there, including Mottaki,"

[Tehran](#)-based analyst Hassan Fathi told (RFE/RL). "For example, when Mottaki goes on a mission, he first reports to Khamenei, then to the cabinet."

Khamenei indirectly blasted Ahmadinejad's decision in an August 30 meeting with the Iranian cabinet, during which he warned against parallel activities in different areas - including foreign policy.

"Another management point [that should be observed] by the cabinet is that duplication in various fields, including in the foreign policy arena, must be avoided and ministers should be trusted within the framework of their authorities and responsibilities," Khamenei was quoted as saying, as reported by RFE/RL.

Ahmadinejad, who was once quoted as saying that he is "light years ahead of the Foreign Ministry", may have wanted to bring in line the more traditional foreign policy machinery behind his external vision and objectives.

But the appointments are a gamble that may backfire, just as this seems to have happened with United States [President Barack Obama's](#) Afghanistan policy. Recent revelations show that the (now retired) US general in Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal, despised the constant interventions of [Obama's](#) special envoy, Richard Holbrooke.

Often a "turf" issue, in today's Iran's it's a balancing act between a prudent Foreign Ministry and an action-oriented president, whose foreign policy ideas are not always shared by veteran diplomats.

With two-and-a-half more years until his presidency ends, Ahmadinejad is determined to put his personal stamp on various foreign policy issues, even though on some issues, such as renewing talks with the [United States](#), he has been clearly reminded that the final decision rests solely with the supreme leader. In terms of the evolution of the presidency in the Islamic Republic, however, Ahmadinejad's decision may make sense in the long term rather than the short term.

At a time when the country is under tough international sanctions over its nuclear program, not to mention a constant military threat, and there are growing signs of an emerging anti-Iran regional alliance with some extra-regional participation, Tehran cannot afford to ignore any opportunity to increase its diplomatic skills and wherewithal.

This is even though this may have secondary negative outcomes. The primary issue is the attempt to neutralize the efforts of Iran's many adversaries, whose emissaries can be seen crisscrossing the Middle East in a frantic effort to shore up an alliance against Tehran, dubbed as "the biggest Middle East problem" by US [Secretary of State](#) Hillary Clinton.

Some in the Middle East may choose to differ, citing Western military interventionism as the region's biggest problem, but that is a separate story. On balance, Ahmadinejad's selection of special envoys is a prudent move, but only in so far as they team up with, rather than bypass, Foreign Ministry officials.

Note

1. [Ahmadinejad Encroaches On Supreme Leader's Foreign-Policy Turf](#), Radio Free [Europe](#)/Radio Liberty, September 08, 2010.