

# Iran's internal battle for power

by Thierry Lalevée

The editorial in *EIR*'s Aug. 28, 1987 issue promised that only the application of compelling force will force reason upon the demented mullahs who rule in Teheran. Exactly as we predicted, the delivery of a cold bath in the Persian Gulf to a bunch of Iranian crazies (who may never have bathed before in their lives), is having the desired effects inside Iran of bringing the "falling out among thieves" to the fore and hastening the demise of the Khomeini regime itself.

As this occurs, some of the European governments that had cultivated their own "back channels" to this or that faction of mullahs, have withdrawn vital support from the regime in Teheran. A case in point is the recent shutdown of the London weapons procurement offices of the Iranians.

According to the Sept. 25 issue of the London-based Saudi daily *Asharq al Awsat*, three reasons led to the British government decision to close down the Iranian Military Procurement offices. First, the future of the mullahs in a post-Khomeini Iran is more than uncertain; if they remain in power, they will have to share it with broader and more secular political forces. Second, Iran's succession fight has already created a situation where there is no stable power structure to negotiate with. Third, the process set off in the wake of Khomeini's expected death, may lead to the disintegration of the country.

As the Saudi daily pointed out, the decision was not an easy one, given that London had always kept its back channels with Iran since its ambassador, Anthony Parsons, had successfully convinced the Shah to leave the country. Political power and ability to influence Iran's relations with the West were the real stakes, beyond the billions of dollars worth of contracts signed over the years.

Few would venture to publicly share such a definitive and assertive judgment of Iran's present situation as *Asharq al Awsat* attributes to the British government. Too many have been caught in the past making just such mistakes. However, particularly as the military build-up in the Gulf keeps up the pressure, Iran is indeed facing a severe internal crisis, heated up by the execution of Mehdi Hashemi, the former chairman of the "World Islamic Liberation Movement," in mid-September, and the increasing rumors of Ruhollah Khomeini's death.

As early as mid-August, *EIR* began receiving reports that

the decrepit Khomeini had a brain tumor and had to be operated on soon. Rumors began spreading that his illness was so advanced that he would have to be flown in mid-September to Vienna to be operated on by Professor Fillinger. Formerly the personal surgeon of Iran's Shah, Professor Fillinger, now more than 80 years old, is widely renowned in the Iranian exile community. Unfortunately for the Teheran fanatics, his clinic is now directed by an *Iraqi* professor.

It then turned out that the Aug. 11 visit of Ahmad Khomeini to Switzerland had concerned his father's health. Two Lausanne-based professors, Professor Rivière and Professor Sadeghi, who have been following Khomeini's case for years, were visited. Latest reports say that they flew into Iran, with the necessary neuro-surgical equipment to perform an operation in the country directly.

Not only is the actual state of Khomeini's health uncertain, but it is also an open question whether Iran's fanatical mullahs will allow him to die, or play a theological trick transforming him into another "hidden Imam," the Thirteenth! For a regime which displayed make-believe tricks of comedians playing the role of the Imam Hussein on a White Horse to lead the *baseej* into the minefields, nothing is impossible.

## War among thieves

These rumors have been enough to lead the Iranian "political class" into a frenzy, positioning themselves for Khomeini's succession. This is the secret behind the radical statements made recently by Parliamentary Speaker Hashemi Rafsanjani when he declared at the Oct. 2 Friday Prayer: "If our youth and ourselves are due to be martyred, it is sweeter for us to have a direct confrontation with the United States because, first of all, that war would in the long run result in peace for Muslims, and second, we would be fighting with the root cause of the war and the instigator of Iraq. . . . Nothing is sweeter, more desirable and more Islamic for Iran than to fight against an invasion by the Americans."

Hence, it has been under the direct leadership of Rafsanjani, and of his factional ally, Pasdaran Minister Mohsen Rafight-Dust, that a flotilla of Pasdaran-manned small speed boats has been deployed into the Gulf. After weeks of successful hit-and-run operations which provoked no major retaliations from the Western powers, let alone from the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Teheran felt confident that it could launch a major provocation, and get away with it, before a retaliation. Those assumptions ran into a small problem on Oct. 8, when the United States military force in the Gulf defended itself from Iranian fire by sinking an Iranian gunboat.

Although a confrontation in the Gulf could bestow Khomeini's mantle on the militant Rafsanjani, Rafsanjani's internal moves are bound to provoke a backlash. A central issue is the execution of Mehdi Hashemi, who "leaked" the incriminating information on the Iran-Contra deals to the

West. Officially announced on Sept. 28, the execution actually occurred on Sept. 21, a week earlier. The news was not revealed for two reasons. 1) It coincided with President Khomeini's flight to the United Nations General Assembly, and 2) Rafsanjani did not want to draw public attention to certain "coincidences."

The very same day as the execution, an unsuccessful assassination attempt was made against Hassan Sabra, the editor of the Beirut-based weekly *As Shiraa*, the magazine which, on Oct. 3, 1986, unleashed Irangate through its revelations on the negotiations between Rafsanjani and Robert McFarlane and Oliver North. As came out later, Sabra had received his precious information from Mehdi Hashemi, and his clan, associated with Khomeini's official "heir-apparent," Ayatollah Montazeri. As Hashemi was about to be executed, Sabra planned the publication of his diaries. After weeks of unsuccessful negotiations trying to get Sabra not to publish, Rafsanjani ordered Issa Tabatabai, boss of the Iranian intelligence service Savama in Beirut, to organize the murder.

But it failed. Though Sabra has not yet published Hashemi's ultimate memoirs, they are bound to come out, with more damaging material against Rafsanjani. Hashemi was no simple factional opponent. The Hashemis and the Montazeris have been associated for more than 30 years in the small town of Najafabad. At Montazeri's urging, Mehdi Hashemi and his brother, Hadi, established in 1971 a short-lived "Islamic Republic of Najafabad." Their first victim was a local grand-Ayatollah who opposed Montazeri. Then Hashemi created the Hadafieh organization, a gang of thugs which committed murders both before and after the Islamic Revolution. In the early period, they worked closely with Montazeri's son, Mohammed, nicknamed "Ayatollah Ringo," a close friend of Qaddafi, until he was killed in June 1981. While Mehdi Hashemi could not be saved by Montazeri's personal intervention, Hadi Hashemi, who married Montazeri's daughter, was saved and exiled to Meshed.

Beside the personal issues of the fight between Rafsanjani and Montazeri, there is a broader theological difference. Rafsanjani and his crowd represent an Islamic Shi'ite theology rooted within Iran's borders; the Hashemi organization has been the vanguard of an Islamic International which knows no boundaries and rejects the notion of the nation-state, even if Islamic. For them, Iran is not the end, but a mere staging ground for a Universal Islamic Ummah (community); while others conceive of Iran as the keystone of an association of Islamic states. Confused during the frenzy of the so-called revolution, the debate and issues have remained unresolved.

The point was driven home in the hours following the announcement of Mehdi Hashemi's execution. Security protection was immediately increased around Rafsanjani and such allies as Mohammedi Reyshahri, the Minister for Public Security. Though they have hunted and arrested Hashemi's

followers for a year, many members of the Hadafieh organization are still present within Iran. Hashemi's ideology is also shared by many of the organizations that Rafsanjani and Reyshahri are forced to support, such as the anti-Baath Party "Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq."

Many powerful figures in the leadership of the SAIRI, such as the Modarassi brothers, do not want merely an Islamic State in Iraq, they want the whole region. Furthermore, while appointing the former Iranian ambassador to the Vatican, Hadi Kosrow-Shahi, as the new head of the "Islamic Liberation Movement," under the control of Reyshahri and of the Foreign Ministry, they could not disband the external network. Indeed, when it came to terrorism abroad, Rafsanjani had nothing to learn from Hashemi, as long as he is personally in control, and can use it internally for himself. How many members of these external networks are reliable, is now Rafsanjani's nightmare. The Hashemi organization still exists in Libya, as well as in Lebanon, where it has powerful protection. That includes the Syrians who, for their own reasons, didn't prevent Sabra from publishing his revelations last year, and are always eager to be in a position to influence Iran's internal fight.

That leaves Rafsanjani with only one alternative to overcome these obstacles: to become more radical than his enemies.

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