

Iran's pro-Soviet radical faction gains

by Thierry Lalevée

Hossein Ali Montazeri's forced resignation as the official successor of Ayatollah Khomeini at the end of March, was an indication of strengthening ties between Iran and the Soviet Union, and the boosting of radical pro-Soviet factions around Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi. Officially, Khomeini accepted Montazeri's "offer" of resignation as divergences became evident on internal matters. Montazeri had voiced criticism of the executions that have been going on unabated since the end of the Gulf War last July. He underlined his opposition to such policies by holding a highly publicized meeting with one leading opponent, former Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan.

But the question of Soviet-Iranian relations also played an important role. In a letter sent to Mikhail Gorbachov in January, Khomeini called on the Soviet leader to send Soviet Muslim students to Qom and Meshed in Iran for training. Already, Muslims from East bloc countries like Bulgaria are studying the Khomeini brand of Islam, with the approval of the Communist authorities. Moscow agreed to the offer, and while no Soviet Muslim has yet arrived, Montazeri is reported to have fiercely opposed the plan, fearing infiltration by Soviet intelligence.

The dismissal of Montazeri has created a vacuum in the religious leadership. There is no other grand ayatollah who could be named to become Khomeini's successor. Of the few remaining grand ayatollahs, all have been critical of the regime and some are even under house arrest. This means that Khomeini's succession will rest, not with one religious figure, but a council of mullahs.

Mohtashemi and the Russians

While Montazeri's dismissal certainly came as good news to his arch-rival, Parliament Speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the balance of power has shifted toward the more radical circles around Mohtashemi, whose stature has been enhanced by his long-standing contact with Soviet intelligence. This started in the late 1960s, when he was the link between Khomeini, then in Najaf, Iraq, and Soviet-controlled terror organizations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) of George Habash and its special operations group led by Wadi Haddad. Through such channels, some of Khomeini's followers received training in camps in Lebanon. Mohtashemi cultivated these connections while he was ambassador to Damascus, where he created the Lebanese section of the Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad.

The recent mention of Mohtashemi as one of the brains— together with Ahmed Jibril of the PFLP-General Command in Damascus—behind the Dec. 21, 1988 downing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, indicates how Moscow has succeeded in integrating within a single terror command the "Palestinian" and "Islamic fundamentalist" components.

The Soviet role has been prominently featured, through the visit of Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze to Teheran in late February, followed by the early-March visit to Moscow of Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammed Hussein Lavassani (who had played an important role in the June 1985 TWA Flight 847 hijacking), and then the meeting on April 1 between Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati and Mikhail Gorbachov.

Besides the resignation of Montazeri, there has been an ongoing purge within the state apparatus. Mohammed Javad Larijani, the number-three man in the Foreign Ministry, was forced to resign in mid-March upon his return from a visit to the United States, where he had met U.S. and U.N. officials. He was denounced by Mohtashemi for having asked the United States for a mere "token gesture" of compensation for the July 3, 1988 downing of an Iranian civilian airliner by the *USS Vincennes*. Larijani was immediately replaced by Mahmoud Vaezi, who has for years led the East bloc department of the Foreign Ministry and was responsible for the recent breakthroughs in relations between Teheran and Moscow. Iran's U.N. ambassador Mahallati was called back to Teheran, forced to resign, and thrown into jail.

The fact that Moscow considers a revolutionary Islam an asset in the region was also underscored by the election on March 15 of a new mufti for the Soviet Central Asian Muslim board. The election followed by a month the unexpected dismissal of Babakhanov, the previous mufti, for "corruption." Babakhanov belonged to a traditional religious family which had held responsibility regionally for decades. His successor is a 36-year-old Islamic cleric, Mohammed Sadiq. While religious leaders traditionally study at Islam's oldest university at Al Azhar, Sadiq only took classes at the Islamic Institute of the University of Tripoli in Libya.

The consequences of Moscow's radical Islamic tilt are several. It puts into Moscow's hands a wide-ranging terror weapon already mobilized around the Salman Rushdie affair. One of the immediate targets may be Turkey. In recent weeks, the Iranians have started to openly interfere into the municipal elections there, leading to the April 3 decision by Ankara to recall its ambassador to Teheran. This followed several terror bombings in the country, under the pretext of the Rushdie affair, and activities by the Iranian ambassador directly in support of the radical Muslims of the Welfare Party. Thanks to Iranian money, they scored 10% nationally in the recent elections, gaining control of entire cities such as the Islamic center of Konya. No less a threat to Turkey is the strengthening of ties between Iran and Bulgaria's Muslims.