

Iran's New Foreign Minister: Ali Akbar Salehi

by MEHRZAD BOROUJERDI

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Three different looks at the new Iranian Foreign Minister: "[Salehi's Turn](#)," is written by our correspondent in Tehran; "[Salehi's In Tray](#)," by Gareth Smyth, formerly the Financial Times' bureau chief in Tehran, and the one below, from USIP:

[profile] The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is better noted for its dense, jargon-filled technical reports than for grooming future political personalities. Yet former IAEA officials have recently catapulted into the political spotlight of two pivotal countries in the Middle East.

Ali Akbar Salehi, a former Iranian envoy to the U.N. nuclear watchdog, has been appointed Iran's foreign minister. And Mohamed ElBaradei, who headed the IAEA until 2009, has now emerged as a leading opposition leader in Egypt. The two men, who quarreled for years over Iran's nuclear program, are expected to play critical roles in their countries' future.

Salehi has academic and administrative pedigrees in Iran as well as extensive experience with the outside world. Born in Karbala, Iraq in 1949, he earned an undergraduate degree in physics from the American University of Beirut in 1971. He then spent five years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology working on a doctorate in nuclear engineering.

In Iran, Salehi climbed the academic ladder quickly. He worked at Isfahan University then moved to Tehran's Sharif University of Technology, which is widely considered Iran's MIT. He served for seven years as chancellor in the 1980s and early 1990s.

After the 1997 election of reformist President Mohamed Khatami, Salehi was appointed Iran's envoy to the IAEA, where he earned a reputation as a smart yet moderate negotiator during his seven year stint from 1997 to 2004. From 2007 to 2009, he worked as deputy secretary general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Saudi Arabia.

In 2009, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad appointed him to serve as one of several vice presidents and to head Iran's Atomic Energy Organization.

Salehi was born into a religious family and, true to his pious upbringing, his dissertation on "Resonance Region Neutronics of Unit Cells in Fast and Thermal Reactors" begins with the Koranic verse, "In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful."

Other members of Salehi's family also have American connections. His brother Javad, who was born in 1956, worked on a doctorate in electrical engineering at the University of Southern California and is an acclaimed specialist on fiber optic communications. In an ironic twist, the younger Salehi and 124 colleagues at Sharif University of Technology sent an open letter to Ahmadinejad in June 2009 -- the same year his brother was appointed vice president and just days before the disputed presidential elections -- that was highly critical of Ahmadinejad's style of statecraft.

Ali Akbar Salehi was confirmed by Iran's unicameral parliament as foreign minister on January 30, 2011. He won 60 percent of the vote.

Salehi has lived in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Austria and the United States. He is also fluent in Arabic and English. He has become a specialist in both the science and statecraft of Iran's controversial nuclear program. As a former envoy, he has extensive experience in international diplomacy. And he has close ties with

Islamic conference Organization Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu.

Given his background, he may have a stronger voice in articulating Iran's positions than his predecessor Manoucher Mottaki, who was dismissed abruptly by Ahmadinejad while on a mission to Senegal. He served for five years as foreign minister.

Salehi is more of a technocrat than an ideologue. He has worked with both reformist and hardline administrations in Iran and has close friends in both camps. Although he was handpicked by Ahmadinejad, his influence on policy and his personal relationship with either the president or Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are not clear.

Ahmadinejad criticized President Khatami's administration for signing of the additional IAEA nuclear protocol in 2003. Yet he appointed Salehi who, as Iran's IAEA envoy, signed the agreement.

Ahmadinejad and Mottaki split in part over the president's appointment of special envoys for important regions of the world, basically usurping the role of Iran's diplomatic corps. It is not yet clear what role, if any, these envoys will play now that Salehi is at the helm.

Salehi has negotiated political landmines in the past, but Iran's top diplomat now faces formidable tasks during the last two years of Ahmadniejad's second term. His main tasks will be revitalizing the foreign ministry, avoiding additional international sanctions -- including circumventing sanctions against him personally by the European Union -- and defending the regime's controversial policies.

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