

M E H D I   K H A L A J I



# TIGHTENING THE REINS

**HOW KHAMENEI MAKES DECISIONS**



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Cover: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei holds a weapon as he speaks at the University of Tehran. (Reuters/Raheb Homavandi).

Design: 1000 Colors

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EVEN UNDER ITS MOST DESPOTIC REGIMES, modern Iran has long been governed with some degree of consensus among elite factions. Leaders have conceded to or co-opted rivals when necessary to maintain their grip on power, and the current regime is no exception. Yet determining the nature of such consensus and its effect on Iranian decisionmaking is particularly complicated today, due in no small part to the unique nature of the Islamic Republic. The combination of regular national elections and *velayat-e faqih*—the doctrine that grants the Supreme Leader lifelong authority as ruling jurist—has lent an air of unpredictability to the regime’s behavior.

To better understand Iranian decisionmaking, one must first look at Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s background. He was by no means a typical cleric—his acquaintances, interests, and ambitions were shaped more by intellectual currents than by clerical tradition. After the 1979 revolution, such interests developed into an enthusiasm for military affairs that would greatly influence his approach to consolidating power in later years.

Once Khamenei succeeded Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, many of his appointees hailed not from the first generation of the Islamic Republic but rather from a new generation of politicians with military or security backgrounds. Since then, this approach has gradually transformed the country’s top military structure—the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—into a key player in Iranian politics and economics, allowing Khamenei to establish a very powerful centralized authority. This in turn gives him the last say on foreign policy, the nuclear issue, and many other matters.

To be sure, the Supreme Leader is not omnipotent, and various factors and individuals have affected his decisions over the years. Attempts to unify the government and completely dissolve factionalism within the ruling elite have failed, often generating crises instead. Yet Khamenei has established numerous mechanisms to manage schisms and exert his authority.

For example, Khamenei's "house"—the Office of the Supreme Leader—has from its inception been led and staffed by personal acquaintances and loyalists, most of whom are bureaucrats rather than politicians. Thus, while the office influences him by determining what information he receives, Khamenei has sought to keep political factors from seeping into that information by personally managing the office and bringing close friends into his inner circle. A look at the structure of this "house" can therefore help explain how the Supreme Leader thinks, what he believes, and whom he trusts.

Khamenei has also kept his office distant from the clergy, unlike Khomeini, who surrounded himself with clerical disciples. Over the years, a new bureaucracy was imposed on the once-independent clerical establishment. The nature of the Islamic Republic, combined with Khamenei's efforts to consolidate control, made the seminaries completely dependent on the regime for financial and political support. Today, Khamenei is responsible for appointing the council that manages Iran's major seminaries and related religious institutes. He has also revolutionized the clergy's administrative structure, replacing the traditional order based on oral culture with a modern, computerized system that gives him great control over the private lives, public activities, political orientation, expenditures, and property holdings of clerics. Other coercive mechanisms (e.g., the Special Court of Clerics; the "Statistical Office," an organ of the Ministry of Intelligence; a special militia brigade composed of guerrilla clerics) have further helped him repress opposition. Hundreds of clerics have been imprisoned and executed as a result of such structures, which often disregard Iranian legal procedures.

At the same time, many clerics are rewarded with a wide array of amenities, privileges, and business opportunities. Today's clerical establishment is both the wealthiest in Iran's history and the least likely to call for a secular, democratic government that would remove many of these benefits.



On the political front, Khamenei has had to navigate tensions with the country's other top office, the presidency, even going so far as to question whether the position should be abolished. While the president's powers are limited to the executive branch and greatly constrained by institutions under the Supreme Leader's control, he can challenge the ruling jurist's authority in many cases. Khamenei lacks Khomeini's charisma and popularity, so he has been forced to devise sophisticated measures for keeping the president in check—at times with nearly disastrous results.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency best illustrates how such tensions can play out, and how the Supreme Leader failed in his goal of ending factionalism by spearheading the election of a subservient president. Despite paving Ahmadinejad's way to electoral victory, Khamenei felt compelled to turn on him once he began to exert independence from the Supreme Leader and the IRGC and to develop his own sphere of economic and political influence. For example, Khamenei allowed the judiciary, intelligence, and media apparatuses to accuse various people in Ahmadinejad's circle of economic or moral corruption, connection with opposition movements, or links with Western governments.

In the end, such efforts have harmed both Khamenei's personal image and that of the Islamic Republic. The mass protests that followed Ahmadinejad's disputed 2009 reelection forced the Supreme Leader to resort to violence against peaceful demonstrators, leading many Muslims throughout the world to question the regime's religious legitimacy. Moreover, his subsequent efforts to control Ahmadinejad effectively forced him to discredit the same person he wanted to keep in power in 2009.

Early signs suggest a less perilous relationship with Hassan Rouhani, who was elected president in June 2013. Rouhani has sought common ground with the Supreme Leader on issues such as reducing the IRGC's role in the country's economy. The Supreme Leader, in turn, has been generally supportive of Rouhani's efforts in the nuclear talks with the West. No doubt, keeping up such a dynamic will depend on the president's sustained deference.

The Supreme Leader has also kept other branches of the government under his thumb. He frequently intervenes in legislative deci-

sions, whether through direct letters to the speaker of parliament or by sending word through the Guardian Council and his personal office. More important, he controls the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), a small group responsible for designing Iran's defense and security policies and responding to internal and external threats. Although the president is the council's titular head, Khamenei's personal representative is the one who truly leads its deliberations, and most of the other members are his appointees.

Today, the council has sway over many foreign policy matters, including the nuclear issue. In recent years, Khamenei has taken pains to disavow the approach that former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani took on the issue. In particular, he has claimed that he is not responsible for policies he regards as soft and ineffective—in his view, the “flexibility” shown by past nuclear negotiators without his approval only encouraged “the enemy” to make bolder demands. Since then, he has taken steps to assume ownership of the nuclear portfolio, such as establishing control over the SNSC and forming a negotiating team stocked with loyalists.

Finally, Khamenei's relationship with the IRGC is perhaps the most complicated factor in regime decisionmaking. Since assuming power, he has transformed the Guards from a military force to a religious, political, economic, and cultural complex, one that controls the country's media and educational system. But despite the IRGC's power and numerous internal rifts, there is no evidence that any of its commanders are in a position to challenge the Supreme Leader's authority. Among other measures, Khamenei has kept the Guards in check by purging old commanders, deploying his personal representatives throughout the ranks, and appointing each commander's deputies himself; in fact, many of these deputies report directly to him.

Going forward, it is important to remember that Khamenei has changed his views on certain issues in the name of political expediency. For example, when he first became Supreme Leader, he found it necessary to put aside his (private) opposition to actively anti-American policies. He did so not out of any grand ideological shift, but simply to confiscate political capital from the leftists who had grown powerful during Khomeini's reign. By becoming more anti-

American than the anti-Americans, so to speak, he was able to marginalize them and increase his own authority. His hold on power is much stronger today, however, so a major shift is less likely unless domestic pressures increase dramatically. He may not be able to eliminate his critics within the political elite, but he has protected his interests thus far by curbing the influence of those seeking to remodel Iran's anti-American, anti-Israel, and nuclear policies, including each of the last three presidents.



# TIGHTENING THE REINS



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## INTRODUCTION

*“Princes, especially new ones, have found more fidelity and assistance in those men whom at the beginning of their rule they regarded with suspicion than in those whom at first they trusted.”*

Machiavelli, *The Prince*

SINCE HASSAN ROUHANI’S VICTORY in the June 2013 presidential elections, understanding the decisionmaking process in the Islamic Republic has become all the more urgent. Rouhani’s victory, as many have remarked, was by no means expected. But the former representative of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in the Supreme National Security Council appeared to surge in polls in the days before the vote, allowing him to pass candidates closer to the Supreme Leader, namely Tehran mayor Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf and Supreme National Security Council secretary and top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili. Rouhani, a seeming critic of Khamenei’s views over the past eight years, emerged victorious with 50.67 percent of the vote.<sup>1</sup>

On June 12, two days before the election, Khamenei stated:

It is possible that some people—for whatever reason—do not want to support the Islamic Republic regime but obviously want to support their country. They should also vote. Everybody should vote and prove his presence...Our country has an enemy, an opponent...In world politics, you cannot defeat your enemy just by making him ashamed. No. The more you show weakness, the more he steps forward and becomes more shameless...We should make our choice and proceed based on the correct and wise view.<sup>2</sup>

Khamenei’s statement was unprecedented for at least two reasons: It acknowledged, for the first time, the patriotism of those Irani-

ans who might be considered “anti-Islamic Republic” and who have been maligned as traitors by the regime’s propaganda machine over the last thirty-five years. Furthermore, this acknowledgment reflected an implicit call to these citizens to go ahead and vote for Rouhani. On June 26, Khamenei once again expressed his appreciation for voters unsympathetic to the Islamic Republic:

If anyone is not completely happy with the Islamic regime, but the country and its interests matter for him, he should also vote. Presumably some of those individuals have voted. What does this mean? This means that even those who do not advocate the regime trust it. They also know the regime of the Islamic Republic can protect and defend the country’s interests and national dignity. The problem of some world governments is that they cannot defend their nations, interests, and dignity against international pressures and greedy [enemies]. The Islamic Republic is solid and vigorous like a lion and can stand against its enemies and defend the interests of the nation... This is known even by those who possibly voted without believing in the regime...<sup>3</sup>

According to some commentators, the conservative camp was splintered more than ever in last year’s election—a situation that raised tensions within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Some factions supported Jalili, while others, including Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, backed Qalibaf. Even clerical-political organizations such as the Association of Teachers of Qom Seminaries (*Jameh-ye Modarresin-e Howzeh-ye Elmiyeh-ye Qom*) experienced such a high degree of fragmentation that they failed to coalesce around and thus promote a single candidate. Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, who heads the Supreme Council for the Association of Teachers, reported that the election discord left the association on the verge of a split.<sup>4</sup>

The 2013 presidential election differed in other notable ways from its 2009 precursor. This time, the government did not jam satellite television, block the Internet, or cut cell phone service on Election Day. In contrast to the aftermath of the 2009 vote, none of the candidates has raised the prospect of fraud, even as skeptics on both sides have, with possible justification, expressed suspicions that Rouhani received either more or less than the reported 50.67 percent. How-



ever credible these objections, Rouhani won by the narrowest margin of any presidential candidate in the history of the Islamic Republic. Questions thus arise: Why didn't Khamenei, the IRGC, or other government forces intervene to stop a Rouhani victory, if indeed they did not favor such an outcome? And, if Rouhani was somehow their favorite, what might have sparked such a policy shift, what might the shift reflect, and what are the potential consequences?

Such mysteries about the recent vote point to the broader reality that decisionmaking within the Islamic Republic does not follow any conventional model premised on either dictatorships or democracies. Nor does Iran's model and its guiding principle of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurispudent) fit traditional categories of government (e.g., dictatorship, military authoritarianism, despotism, totalitarianism, autocracy, theocracy, oligarchy). All this creates complications for any nation that must deal with Iran in one way or another, including whether analysis should focus on actor or structure, context or conduct. Further roiling the discussion is that national elections take place roughly every two years,<sup>5</sup> but in a system whose center of gravity is a Supreme Leader who holds a permanent job and is free from accountability. The best approach, given these variables, seems to be a focus on the interaction between political actors and systemic structures or contexts rather than emphasis on any one of them. Such an approach can be applied effectively not only to Khamenei's rule, but also in analyzing the reign of his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose extraordinary charisma and popularity enabled him to shape the politics of the first decade of the Islamic Republic.

Perhaps the most useful lesson one can draw from the last thirty-five years is that every time the Islamic Republic's leaders have tried to unify the government and dissolve factionalism within the ruling elite, they have failed. Likewise, attempts to rein in diversity within the system have invariably created further crisis, forcing the government to regularly sideline members and thus help spawn new political generations. By analogy, Khamenei has described this dynamic between the regime and its elements as "fall-off" (autumn) and "blossom" (spring).<sup>6</sup> This shedding and renewal process has the effect of maintaining the "revolutionary" nature of the regime, with each new administration representing a revolt against its prede-

cessor. Every president, in turn, aspires to found a new “tradition,” reversing whatever precedents he inherits.

As for Khamenei’s personal rise, it reached a turning point in 1989, when at age fifty he was named Khomeini’s successor. Khamenei was a cleric who lacked not only his forerunner’s charisma but his religious and political credentials as well. At first, instituting changes required that Khamenei honor the interests of several other centers of power. But gradually, over nearly two and a half decades, Khamenei has accumulated formidable centralized authority, aided by transformation of the IRGC’s role in overseeing the country’s politics and economy. He now enjoys the final say on many issues, especially when it comes to foreign policy and the nuclear issue. Ironically, a leader once seen as an inadequate successor to Khomeini may now have accumulated more power than the first Supreme Leader, at least in some areas.

This study is thus focused on explaining the decisionmaking process within Iran’s highest political echelon. Setting aside the notion of the Supreme Leader as omnipotent, certain realities and actors can affect his mindset and decisions. Until now, few studies have examined these contingencies with regard to either Khamenei or Khomeini. Practically speaking, a better understanding of the subtleties that drive the Supreme Leader’s actions and behavior can help U.S. and other leaders craft a more effective approach to the regime, particularly in light of its emerging nuclear capability.

This study begins by providing an overview in chapters 2 and 3 of Khamenei’s personal life before the revolution and the social and political context in which he was raised and trained. Chapter 4 enters his “house,” or office, explaining the ways in which he built a bureaucracy without a prior model, as well as how this house structure can explain how he thinks, what he believes, and whom he trusts. Unlike Khomeini, who was surrounded by clerical disciples and apostles, Khamenei has kept his office distant from the clergy and instead imposed a new bureaucracy on the clerical establishment. Correspondingly, Chapter 5 explores the relationship between Khamenei and the clergy.

Chapter 6 examines an important source of political tension in the Islamic Republic is examined—the dual system led by a

Supreme Leader who represents a divine guide (the Shia messiah) until the latter's return to create a just and global government on earth and a president who benefits from the legitimacy conferred by a nationwide election. While the president is only in charge of the government's executive branch and his authority is tightly limited by institutions under the Supreme Leader, he can still in many cases challenge the Supreme Leader's authority and affect the power equation.

Chapters 7 and 8 attempt to shed light on Khamenei's relationship with other political institutions, such as the Supreme National Security Council and Majlis (parliament), especially with respect to foreign policy. Prominent in this discussion is the IRGC, a massive entity that comprises both a military force operating parallel to but better equipped than Iran's regular military and a network with unique access to Iran's economic resources and the ability to affect the nation's politics in various ways. This section discusses Khamenei's role in developing the IRGC and transforming it from a military force into a religious, political, economic, and cultural complex.

The conclusion examines the effects of infighting on the political scene. In general terms, the regime has failed to achieve its goal of remaining unified internally and popular in the eyes of the public. In a bid to retain power, leaders have shifted their political stances, with Khamenei himself engaging in this practice. The paper closes with policy implications suggested by this narrative of Khamenei's decisionmaking process.<sup>7</sup>

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## NOTES

1. According to Iranian interior minister Mostafa Najjar, 72.7 percent (or 36,704,156) of eligible voters participated in the election, with 18,613,329 votes going to Hassan Rouhani. Read Najjar's statement at <http://washin.st/NL25xk>.
2. For the full transcript of his speech in Persian, see the website of the Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=22900>.
3. For the full transcript in Persian, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=23006>. Mohsen Rafiqdoost, former head of the Foundation of the Oppressed and Disabled, said, "Given the fact that Rafsanjani

was disqualified [by the Guardian Council] and all that happened in 2009...Everyone expected the participation rate to be lower than 40 percent, but the Supreme Leader has beautifully engineered the election. Even we ourselves did not expect 72 percent of the people to participate in the election....The winners of this election were the Supreme Leader and the nation.” See the full text of the interview: <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/303302/Politics/parties>.

4. See BBC Persian, July 1, 2013, <http://washin.st/1hmmVQU>.
5. The broader context is one in which presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections happen every four years and Assembly of Experts elections happen every seven years.
6. For the full Persian transcript of his June 28, 2005, speech, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3297>.
7. For an overview of Khamenei’s foreign policy, see Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran’s Most Powerful Leader* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), <http://washin.st/1jW97vM>.

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## LIFE AND THOUGHT OF THE LEADER

SUPREME LEADER ALI KHAMENEI may carry an air of inscrutability and omnipotence, but in reality he has a complex psychology and worldview shaped by his upbringing and education in Mashhad, in northeastern Iran, and his relationship with his family, particularly his father. An examination of these early influences can help present-day analysts understand Khamenei's motivations, his principles, and his latent internal struggles.

Born in 1939 in Mashhad, Ali Khamenei belongs to the religio-socio-political environment of Iran's first holy city. Prior to his birth, the city was occupied by the Russians, who once attacked the dome of Mashhad's holy shrine. Tensions from within were further stirred by Reza Shah Pahlavi's enactment of a dress code for clerics. At a protest at the Gohar Shad Mosque, in which the city's religious class expressed their outrage over this policy, police opened fire, killing several demonstrators. Other checks on the religious class included the requirement that members of the clergy receive consent from qualified ayatollahs to wear the clerical uniform. In line with the shah's decree, and his general attempt to impose a strict bureaucracy on the clergy, endowment properties and assets (*awqaf*), previously under local religious and mercantile authority, were placed under government supervision. Many madrasas (religious schools) were decommissioned and converted into primary or high schools under the Ministry of Education. In the minds of many, such moves confirmed Reza Shah's status as an anticlerical, secularist ruler under Britain's thumb, an embodiment of the British colonialist ethos viewed with particular disdain by the Iranian religious class. Unsurprisingly, the shah's version of nationalism became associated with

both colonialism and secularism. Ultimately, his resignation and exile were brought about after British and Soviet forces entered Iran in 1941. This invasion also contributed to a sharp economic decline in the country.

The city's elite at the time could be divided roughly into four groups. The first consisted of apolitical clerics who were focused on rebuilding the clerical establishment and, toward this end, avoiding any conflict with a powerful government capable of destroying it, as Reza Shah's had attempted to do. Yet these clerics saw their main antagonist not in government but rather in communism and the Bahai faith, both of which were experiencing increasing popularity. For apolitical clerics, an alliance with the government that targeted and marginalized both antireligious and anti-Shiite organizations would strategically safeguard Shiite predominance domestically. The Hojjatiyeh Association—founded by Mahmoud Halabi, a cleric from Mashhad who aimed to challenge the Bahai faith—emerged from this mentality. Additionally, *Kanoun-e Haqayeq-e Islami*—founded by Muhammad Taqi Shariati, the father of the revolutionary intellectual Ali Shariati—essentially defined its mission as the battle against antireligious manifestations in society.

The second faction consisted of a young clerical minority who believed the government, backed by members of the Bahai faith and the West, was corrupt and that, consequently, a fight against the government reflected a legitimate attempt to challenge the forces of secularism and colonialism, along with the Bahai faith. The third faction, composed of nationalist supporters of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq, had a critical view of the government and a tumultuous relationship with the clergy, ultimately severing ties with the latter. In turn, most clerics viewed Mossadeq backers as secularists who aided “foreigners” in their fight against clerical power. Rounding out the elite factions was the fourth group: the leftists, the most organized, who were associated with the Tudeh Party and its many later offshoots. From this outline, one can see how Mashhad was, in fact, fertile ground for groups all across the political spectrum.

Despite the Soviet occupation of Mashhad, the Tudeh Party and the other factions forged a consensus based on an anti-Western,

rather than anti-Soviet, worldview, with even the apolitical clergy joining this bloc. And as the relative tolerance toward the occupying Soviets indicated, the anticolonialist sentiment in Mashhad was directed more toward the British and other Western powers than toward foreign intervention in general. Indeed, during a meeting with Vladimir Putin in 2000, Khamenei maintained that Iranians did not harbor any negative memories regarding Russia.

Khamenei's worldview contains elements of each of the ideologies just described—along with paranoia, xenophobia, and a conspiratorial mindset—but it hews closest to that of the second faction with its focus on government's corruption and its alliance with the Bahai faith. This group was first inspired by the anti-Reza Shah clerics in Mashhad who contested his policy on dress and the veil. Later, however, when the center for opposition to the shah shifted to Qom, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, young clerics in Mashhad followed the Qom leadership.

In Mashhad's seminary—then, and even now—an antirational strain of thought predominated that considered pure Islamic teaching to be at odds with Greek and even Islamic philosophy. In such an environment, the study of Islamic philosophy was discouraged and seminarians were instructed to avoid the application of rational hermeneutics to religious texts. Instead, arcane sciences and ultra-conservative religious rituals were seen as having higher value.<sup>1</sup>

Never a typical cleric, Khamenei lived, or wished to live, in two worlds: intellectual and clerical. On the first count, he studied Persian literature, implying an interest in entering intellectual circles, which then consisted of mostly writers and poets. He also smoked a pipe in public—a very Western gesture—wore a wristwatch, and let his hair grow under his turban, all deviations from the traditional clerical practices then considered sacred and beyond question. But since he was a cleric, his devotion to the world of literary salons, which thrived on anticlerical sentiments generated during the shah's time, likely seemed suspect not only to the salons but to traditional clerics as well, who also questioned the authenticity of his desire to join their ranks. Therefore, he had a foot in both the intellectual and clerical worlds without being fully recognized as a member of either.

Militating against Khamenei's attempts to taste the intellectual life, and central to his character formation, was his father, a cleric himself who wanted his son to become a traditional cleric and avoid politics.<sup>2</sup> Khamenei entered the seminary against his will, and when, as a young cleric, he left Mashhad for Qom to continue his studies at a larger and more important seminary, his father opposed him. Financial problems ultimately forced Khamenei to leave Qom, and he returned to Mashhad, his self-confidence eroded, under pressure by his father. Meanwhile, his older brother pursued a prosperous legal career in Tehran.

Even before Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979, Khamenei enlisted both Islamist and leftist propaganda to brand the shah's regime a puppet of the West. He was heavily influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood theoretician Sayyed Qutb, for whom he translated a few books into Persian.<sup>3</sup> And Marxism influenced him to the point that, like Ali Shariati, he even attempted to provide a revolutionary Marxist interpretation of certain Islamic theological notions, such as the unity of God.

Even after spending several years in the Qom seminary, however, Khamenei remained anonymous among Qom clerics. In Mashhad, he taught courses in Marxist-influenced Islamic ideology to a small group of young revolutionary clerics and nonclerics outside the seminary. His ties to the inner circle of revolutionary leaders were advanced by his relations with the Shariati family and with pro-Khomeini clerics, especially Rafsanjani, who was living in Tehran. Indeed, it was at Rafsanjani's suggestion that Khomeini, despite not knowing much about the younger cleric, chose Khamenei to be a member of the Revolutionary Council.

During the first decade of the Islamic Republic, Khamenei's became increasingly argumentative with higher authorities, including Supreme Leader Khomeini. Khamenei also displayed a growing inability to make, or be accountable for, his decisions. Mistrust of others has shaped his political character, and one outgrowth has been his policy of creating several parallel jobs with the same responsibility, with communication channels leading to him alone. Such practices have allowed him, as Supreme Leader, to maintain full authority without the burden of assuming full responsibility for his decisions.



When in November 1979 pro-Khomeini students occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran, Khamenei was reportedly with future president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in Saudi Arabia, on Hajj.<sup>4</sup> The news of the invasion apparently made him uncomfortable, although he dared not oppose Khomeini publicly because such a stance would have placed his own future political power at risk. As the revolution consolidated its position, however, Khamenei identified with the right wing, positioning himself against the political and economic policies of the leftist-Islamist faction, which then took a harder-line stance than even the conservatives regarding relations with the West. The leftist-Islamists, for their part, would later be protected and supported by Khomeini on several issues, including the mass killing of prisoners in 1988,<sup>5</sup> the fatwa against Salman Rushdie,<sup>6</sup> the purchase of weapons from the United States (in the Iran-Contra affair), the dismissal of Khomeini's deputy Hossein Ali Montazeri,<sup>7</sup> and Khomeini's interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*.<sup>8</sup> When Khamenei became Supreme Leader, he bowed to political realities and reversed his position on all these issues, so powerful were leftist ideas a part of Khomeini's legacy.

Khamenei's travels have almost entirely avoided the West. Before the revolution, he could not afford to travel internationally, with the exception of a few weeks' visit to Iraq with his mother and brothers. After the revolution, but before he became president in 1981, his sole international travel was for the Hajj, as mentioned earlier. After becoming president, he visited Zimbabwe, China, North Korea, Pakistan, Libya, Romania, and Yugoslavia, and traveled once to New York, in 1987, to participate in a session of the United Nations General Assembly. He has never traveled to Western Europe, and since becoming Supreme Leader, he has not left the country. In his mind, the West remains mysterious and untouched. His preference for nineteenth-century Russian over European novels (and over fiction from the twentieth century generally), and for classical over modern poetry, further suggests an avoidance of modern Western thought.

After the revolution, Khamenei served briefly as a representative of the IRGC's Revolutionary Council and also represented Khomeini in the Ministry of Defense. Yet for all his eagerness to be

involved in military affairs, Khomeini deferred to then president Rafsanjani to command the Iran-Iraq War. His enthusiasm for military matters wouldn't find its ground until later.

In even a brief portrait of Ali Khamenei's upbringing and political development, then, one sees not the origins of a monolithic ruler but rather a man who has been shaped by family, sociopolitical upheaval, and the need to adapt positions to retain political viability. This ability and willingness to maneuver when necessary, as we will see, has been central to the Supreme Leader's consolidation of power.

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## NOTES

1. In recent years, the antirationalist trend has been rejuvenated in both Mashhad and Qom. In Mashhad, the prominent cleric Muhammad Reza Hakimi coined the term "separatism" (*maktab-e tafkik*) and has written extensively on its tenets, principally the separation of faith and reason and opposition to the application of rational methodology to religious texts. Mehdi Nasiri, former representative of Ayatollah Khamenei in the Kayhan organization and the editor-in-chief of the *Kayhan* newspaper (under Khamenei), is now a vocal backer of this school in Qom, where he edits and publishes the journal *Semat* (Signs), available online at <http://washin.st/1iqnOEq>.
2. A 2012 biography of Ali Khamenei published by Iran's Institute for Political Studies and Research, which is affiliated with the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, contains useful information about the Supreme Leader's father, Javad. But readers should approach this source warily. Indeed, several factors explain the father's inability to become a well-known cleric in Mashhad, including his status as a transplant from Tabriz, his inadequate mastery of Persian (Azeri being his native tongue), his not-very-social tendencies, and his lack of a prominent educational background. For all these reasons, he served as imam at the Torkha Mosque in the bazaar (marketplace) rather than teaching at the Mashhad seminary. Today, both the bazaar and the mosque have been leveled in the renovation of the old city. Some of Javad's family members, such as Sheikh Muhammad Khiabani, were politically active in Tabriz during the early twentieth-century constitutional movement, but Javad himself was not. According to a document from the shah's Organization of Intelligence and National Security (SAVAK), which operated in the two decades before the Islamic Revolution, Javad was on the government payroll of

the custodian of the Imam Reza Shrine (*Astan-e Quds-e Razavi*). This SAVAK document is mentioned in the biography but has been described by Ayatollah Khamenei as a false report. See Hedayatollah Behboodi, *Sharh-e Esm, Zendegi Nameh-ye Ayatollah Seyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei, 1318–1357 (1939–1979)* (Tehran: Moassesseh-ye Motaleat va Pazhohesh-ha-ye Siasi, 1391 [2013]), pp. 20–21.

3. See Mehdi Khalaji, “The Dilemmas of Pan-Islamic Unity,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 9 (2009): pp. 64–79.
4. According to Rafsanjani, “On November 4, 1979, Ayatollah Khamenei and I were in Mecca. While we were preparing to sleep on the rooftop of our residence, we heard the news about the seizure of the U.S. embassy [in Tehran] on the radio. We were surprised because we did not expect such an incident. It was not our policy. Even in the early days of the revolution victory, when some political groups were chanting radical slogans against America, [Iranian] officials helped those Americans who were in Iran to safely leave the country and return to their homeland and even take some of their assets with them.... It was obvious that neither the Revolutionary Council nor the interim government had any inclination toward such acts.” See Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Inqelab va Piroozi*, ed. Abbas Bashiri (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 1383 [2005]), p. 370.
5. See Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Memoires* (Paris: Entesharat-e Enqelab-Eslami, 2001), pp. 306–7.
6. In a Friday prayer sermon, Khamenei said that if Salman Rushdie were to repent, he might be forgiven. But Khomeini’s office issued a statement emphasizing that Rushdie’s repentance would not be acceptable and that he should be killed even if he did repent. See Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Payan-e Defa va Aghaz-e Bazsazi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1367* (1988) (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 1390 [2011]), pp. 510, 512. On December 26, 1990, more than a year after Khomeini’s death, Khamenei’s office announced that “the historical and immutable fatwa of Imam [Khomeini]” on Salman Rushdie remained valid and that even if Rushdie did repent, he should be killed. See the announcement at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=465>.
7. In his memoir, Rafsanjani indicates that Khamenei was not happy with the harsh reaction to Montazeri’s criticism of the government. See his *Payan-e Defa va Aghaz-e Bazsazi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1367* (1988) (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 1390 [2011]).

8. In his Friday prayer sermon, Khamenei stated that the guardianship of the jurist (*velayat-e faqih*) is bound by sharia, or Islamic law. In reaction to his statement, Khomeini sent him an open letter blaming him for misunderstanding the principle, because according to his theory the ruling jurist's authorities go beyond any law. See Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-ye Noor* (Tehran: Sazman-e Chap va Entesharat-e Vezarat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Eslami, 1370 [1992]), 11: pp. 459, 559.

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## KHAMENEI'S VALUES

ALI KHAMENEI BEGAN HIS TENURE as Supreme Leader with public displays of humility, but a closer look at his record shows deft attempts—notably through his political appointments—to aggregate and build power. Stubbornness in the face of public pressure, as well as a tight-lipped approach to his health problems, has also characterized Khamenei's style.

The ayatollah's overt humility was on display a month after he was appointed Supreme Leader, when the country's Friday prayer imams visited him to demonstrate their allegiance. During their visit, Khamenei stated:

What has happened with regard to the appointment of the [Supreme] Leader and putting the weight of this responsibility on the shoulders of this humble servant [of God] was not expected even for a second. If one thinks that I could have thought of taking this responsibility, whether during the period of fighting [against the shah] or in the course of the revolution or when I had executive responsibility [as president], then that person is wrong. I had always considered myself undeserving not only of such a vital and important position, but even of much lower positions such as president and other responsibilities I had after the revolution. Once I told Imam [Khomeini] that sometimes my name was mentioned alongside others even though I was not of their rank. I am a very ordinary and humble person. These are not polite, empty words. Even now I believe in this...Now I consider myself an ordinary seminarian without any specific advantage...Now that this weight is placed on my shoulders, I take it vigorously as God urged his messengers, "So take it forcefully."<sup>1</sup>

Aware of his low religious credentials,<sup>2</sup> Khamenei sought help from then president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in convincing the ayatollahs, and especially members of the Assembly of Experts, to call him “ayatollah” and portray him as such.<sup>3</sup> Yet Khamenei grew more brazen as his tenure commenced. While at first keeping Khomeini’s appointees in their positions, he gradually began replacing them with his own picks, thereby establishing his personal network and consolidating his authority. He also built a bureaucracy for the Office of the Supreme Leader, allowing him to create altogether new positions and name appointees to them.

Khamenei’s appointments—from chief of the judiciary to the Friday prayer imams<sup>4</sup>—reflected heavy favoritism toward a new generation of Iranian politicians, as compared with Khomeini’s embrace of the Islamic Republic’s first generation. Indeed, Khamenei only tolerated members of the earlier generation if they acknowledged their inferiority to him. Yet he needed to solve state-related issues through Islamic law and lacked the necessary religious legitimacy to do so, and thus formed a juridical board to devise legal solutions on such matters. Appointed members included his older brother Muhammad, Sayyed Mehdi Rouhani, Ali Ahmadi Mianaji, Muhammad Momen, Sayyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, Sayyed Kazem Haeri, Muhammad Ebrahim Jannati, Hassan Javaheri, and Muhammad Ali Taskhiri. Most of these individuals had not been close to Khomeini or to his ideology.<sup>5</sup> Khamenei’s efforts to distance himself from the ayatollahs associated with his predecessor were obvious.

Even if ostensibly civilians or clerics, the new generation of politicians embraced by Khamenei came mainly from a military background. And, particularly in military and security affairs but in other areas as well, Khamenei demonstrated a penchant for micromanagement. Departing from Khomeini’s practice of granting indefinite appointments, the new Supreme Leader tended to issue time-limited appointments and substantially restructure the organizations under these new appointees. Khamenei would thus eventually wield vast control over public and private life in Iran in the political, economic, clerical, charity, and cultural realms. He was also preoccupied with details and appearances, going so far as to instruct his office on seating arrangements before meetings with clerics or officials.<sup>6</sup>

One of Khamenei's core values is "resistance" and firmness against pressure. From the very beginning of his leadership, he was determined to fight leftists, who were powerful under Khomeini, even as he accommodated some of their ideas and positions. In 1989, his first year in power, for example, he appointed Muhammad Yazdi as chief of the judiciary despite opposition from Ahmad Khomeini, the late Supreme Leader's son, along with Ayatollah Abdul Karim Moussavi Ardebili and other influential leftists. In 1992, he maintained this policy by preventing leftists from winning a majority of seats in parliamentary elections.

In 1995, the Supreme Leader demonstrated this value again when he stood by Ali Larijani, then head of state television and radio, after the broadcast of the documentary *Identity*, in which intellectuals were accused of being agents of Western intelligence services. The backlash from the accused stirred sympathy within the public; around the same time, there was a rash of killings of intellectuals. But presumably just to show his resilience, Khamenei did not replace Larijani. The next year, Khamenei showed similar mettle during a large-scale corruption case involving the Janbazan and Mostazafan Foundation, headed by Mohsen Rafiqdoost. Among those implicated was Rafiqdoost's own brother Morteza, who was arrested by the judiciary. Yet, faced with both public and elite pressure to remove Rafiqdoost from his position, Khamenei not only held steady but renewed Rafiqdoost's term for another five years.<sup>7</sup> Acknowledging the corrupt acts of his first appointee to the foundation would have meant a loss of face, an obviously undesirable outcome. For Khamenei, the term "resistance" has likewise become a key word in discourse on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran's nuclear program, and other major foreign policy issues.

Khamenei's "resilience" extends to his near silence regarding his health conditions. He is known to have suffered from longtime depression, stomach problems, and from injuries caused by the June 1981 attempt on his life, yet reports on these conditions are unreliable. In May 1991, he is known to have had surgery, although no details on the procedure are available.<sup>8</sup>

Concealing health problems has a lengthy history among Iran's leaders, dating to before the revolution. Muhammad Reza Shah

kept his grave illness from family members and confidants until very late, as did Khomeini. Yet whereas some scholarly attention has now focused on the impact of the shah's illness on his decisionmaking, few similar studies have been devoted to Khomeini's health, even as details of his physical decline have slowly emerged. For example, a Tehran magazine revealed recently that, in 1986, Khomeini suffered a second heart attack during the postrevolution period, leading doctors to believe he would not survive for long. During his last three years as Supreme Leader, actual power fell to a handful of other individuals, including his son Ahmad, Rafsanjani, Ardebili, Khomeini, and Mir Hossein Mousavi.

Such precedents suggest that were Khamenei to experience serious health problems, the public would not know about them until the very last moment. The material in this chapter also shows the ways in which the Supreme Leader uses his power of appointment to ensure no alternative centers of power develop that could possibly challenge his hegemony. Khamenei is similarly uncompromising when faced with other stiff challenges, with his principles guiding him to hold firm.

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## NOTES

1. In his speech on July 3, 1989, Khamenei referred to a Quran verse in which God asks Moses to overcome his fears and carry out his responsibility as God's messenger: "And we wrote for him on the Tablets of everything an admonition, and a distinguishing of everything: 'So take it forcefully, and command thy people to take the fairest of it. I shall show you the habitation of the ungodly.'" See Quran, 7.145, as cited in A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 188. For the full transcript of Khamenei's speech, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2124>.
2. The well-known Iranian cleric Mohsen Kadivar examined Khamenei's credentials in three articles, which note that he was never known as an ayatollah before his appointment as Supreme Leader. See Kadivar's "Impeaching the Leader for Claiming *Marjaiya*" (<http://www.rahesabz.net/story/69740/>), "Fatwa Issuance and *Marjaiya* by Expediency of the Regime" (<http://www.rahesabz.net/story/69871/>), and "Mr. Khamenei's *Marjaiya*: Its Pros and Cons" (<http://www.rahesabz.net/story/69740/>).



3. According to Rafsanjani, “Clerics collect religious taxes for Khamenei but *marjas* [religious authorities] are unhappy with this.” See Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Bazsazi va Sazandegi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Hashemi Rafsanjani, 1989–1990* (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maref-e Enqelab, 2012), pp. 337–8. On p. 153 of the same volume, Rafsanjani explains, “I wrote the text of the Assembly of Experts’ statement about appointing Ayatollah Khamenei as the Supreme Leader and sent it out. I suggested to the Assembly board to use the ‘Ayatollah’ title instead of Hojjat al-Islam va al-Muslemin. They agreed.” On pp. 205 and 207, Rafsanjani says he suggested using the title “Revolution Leader” for the newly appointed Supreme Leader.
4. Usually he appoints the Friday prayer imam of a provincial capital as his representative in the province, whereas an organization known as the Regulatory Body for Friday Prayer Imams (Dabir Khaneh-e Aemmeh-ye Jomeh) appoints the Friday prayer imams of other cities. In some cases, Khamenei appoints the imam for these other cities too, such as in his appointment of Abu al-Qassem Yaqoubi as imam of Bojnourd. See his appointment letter at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=20434>.
5. See the letter of appointment at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=11173>.
6. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Etedal va Piroozi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Hashemi Rafsanjani, 1990–1991* (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maref-e Enqelab, 2013), p. 84. Also see the account of Ahmad Marvi, the Supreme Leader’s deputy, on how Khamenei assigns each cleric’s place for meetings in Qom: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8908010374>.
7. See his first appointment letter from 1989 at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=329>; see the second from 1992 at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=11151>; see the third from 1996, the year the corruption case was publicized, at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=12236>.
8. In May 1991, Khamenei’s office issued an announcement that Khamenei had left the hospital after a successful surgery, although without specifying the type of surgery. See the announcement at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=16802>.

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## KHAMENEI'S ADVISORS

ONE OF AYATOLLAH KHAMENEI'S main accomplishments has been the bureaucratic reshaping of the Office of the Supreme Leader. Without a doubt, Khamenei himself has benefited from this effort. But the office, known as the House of the Leader (*Bayt-e Rahbar*, in Arabicized Persian), remains an obscure corner in Iranian politics, with little information available on who actually runs it. Since the 2005 election, speculation on this question has centered on Khamenei's second son, Mojtaba, who is also rumored to have gained power within the intelligence community and Basij militia.<sup>1</sup> But much evidence suggests his influence has not diminished the role within the office of other individuals, such as Vahid Haghani, Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, or Asghar Mir Hejazi.

Khamenei started forming his office the day he came to power. Yet he did not choose Khomeini loyalists or well-known political heavyweights but rather friends who had consistently proved their loyalty to him. As his main office managers, he appointed Golpayegani and Hejazi,<sup>2</sup> both of them former Ministry of Intelligence deputies under Mohammad Mohammadi Reishahri and, before that, members of the Islamic Revolution Committee—an entity comparable to the police and, in fact, absorbed into the police under Khamenei's leadership—as well as the army. Others appointed to positions in Khamenei's office had worked under him in the Ministry of Defense, the Islamic Republic Party, and the president's office. These handpicked appointees clearly indicated Khamenei's preference for bureaucrats who would furnish him with information rather than political figures who would provide advice, suggesting Khamenei's

perception of himself as the foremost political analyst and the most knowledgeable authority on political factions and trends.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the composition of Khamenei's office reflected his profound desire to maintain an air of neutrality and to avoid any sense that his staff might be tied to a particular political faction. For Khamenei, then, personal relationships have long trumped political affiliation—and three such relationships are worth mentioning.

Khamenei's friendship with Gen. Muhammad Shirazi, the head of the military department in the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (*Rais-e Daftar-e Nezami-ye Farmandehi-ye Kol-e Qova*), can be traced to Khamenei's years in Rafsanjan, in Kerman province, in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Shirazi's father, Hajj Assadollah Shirazi, was one of the wealthiest and most pious farmers in the village of Kashkouiye, located near Rafsanjan. His guests included many revolutionary clerics, among them Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, Ayatollah Abu al-Qasem Khazali, and Hashemi Nejad. During his frequent visits to Hajj Assadollah's home, Khamenei developed a rapport with his sons, especially Abbas, who went on to become a cleric and would, thanks largely to his relationship with Khamenei, serve in several positions following the revolution,<sup>5</sup> including as head of the Office of War Propaganda and deputy of the Islamic Outreach Organization, before his May 1985 death in a car accident. In his condolence statement, then president Khamenei said, "His services [to the Islamic Republic] were great and unforgettable."<sup>6</sup>

Ali Shirazi, another son of Hajj Assadollah—who himself died in June 2008 at age ninety-four<sup>7</sup>—previously served as Khamenei's representative in the IRGC Navy and was recently appointed as Khamenei's Qods Force representative.<sup>8</sup> He is the author of Khamenei's biography, *Partovi az Khorshid* ("A Ray of the Sun's Light"),<sup>9</sup> as well as *Sokhani-ye Samimaneh ba Rais Jomhour* ("A Sincere Word with the President"), a three-volume critique of former president Mohammad Khatami's reformist agenda.<sup>10</sup> The Shirazi family's relationship with Khamenei gains further interest when one considers that Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani also comes from Kerman province and that he was likely introduced to Khamenei by the Shirazi family before the revolution.<sup>11</sup>

Another of Khamenei's close friends is Ahmad Marvi, who also hails from Mashhad and was a student of ideological studies under Khamenei in the city before the revolution. Around the same time, Khamenei befriended Ahmad's father and his older brother, Hadi, an important figure in Iran's judiciary and the son-in-law of former Guardian Council member Abu al-Qasem Khazali.<sup>12</sup> Ahmad, for his part, was appointed deputy of clerical relations in the Supreme Leader's office a few months after Khamenei entered office.<sup>13</sup>

The third personal relationship of interest is that between Khamenei and his bodyguard, Hossein Jabari, who has headed Khamenei's security since 1979, when Jabari was just eighteen years old. After the June 1981 attempt on Khamenei's life at the Abuzar Mosque, Jabari carried the injured Khamenei away on his back.<sup>14</sup> Three-plus decades of this kind of devotion have allowed Jabari to become Khamenei's confidant.

These examples show the preeminence of close relationships in Khamenei's office. He consults other officials as well. For example, on cultural policies, he depends on Hassan Rahimpour Azghadi, Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, Hossein Panahian, Muhammad Hassan Abu Torabi, and Muhammad Qomi, among others. On media-related issues, he relies on Ezzatollah Zarghami—head of state TV and radio—and Hossein Mohammadi. On intelligence-related issues, he talks with Asghar Mir Hejazi, Ali Fallahian, Hossein Pour Mohammadi, Ruhollah Hosseinian, and others. Yet despite engaging in such consultations, the Supreme Leader never suggests to these individuals that he fully trusts their judgments and strives to retain the impression that his ultimate decisions are his own.

In the hierarchy of forces influencing Khamenei, the clerical establishment holds a very low position, especially over the past decade. The clerics' impotence is largely a function of Khamenei's complete authority over the seminaries, with their vitality dependent on his funding and political support.<sup>15</sup> Yet, while the Supreme Leader shows minimal interest in clerics' views, he expresses concern about clerics' speech and actions, especially in the public sphere.

A recent move away from theological Shiism and toward popular Shiism has also engaged Khamenei in the discussion on religion—on the side of popular Shiism, which emphasizes rituals rather than dogma. Khamenei therefore regards the clergy as managers of the

sacred and overseers of ritual rather than as sources of theological teaching. Illustrating this shift, every year visitors to the Jamkaran Mosque near Qom on the anniversary of the Mahdi's birth roughly equal those to Mecca on Hajj.<sup>16</sup> As interest in theological debate has dimmed for the younger generations, the clergy has largely been tasked with running various government bureaus as well as mosques. Many Iranians differentiate between the "governmental clergy" and the "independent clergy," generally considering the former corrupt, both economically and politically, while respecting the latter. On his 2010 trip to Qom, Khamenei warned that such distinctions reflect an "enemy's tactic [and] a wrong concept and accusation."<sup>17</sup> The Supreme Leader's statement signifies the widespread nature of this perception. For their part, religious Iranians who are critics of the regime look to *marjas*, or grand ayatollahs such as Ali al-Sistani for political guidance. (Sistani, however, attempts to keep a low profile and not to publically oppose Khamenei.)

Khamenei usually trusts low-ranking clerics who have proved their loyalty to him more than he does high-ranking clerics—and, in line with his other preferences, the second generation of the Islamic Republic more than the first. For instance, Khamenei trusts Haydar Moslehi much more than Mohammad Mohammadi Reishahri. Moslehi ascended the ladder of power strictly through Khamenei's assistance, whereas Reishahri owes his political credentials to his father-in-law, Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, who formerly headed the Assembly of Experts and was very close to Khomeini. The class of rising young clerics whom Khamenei has attempted to bring into his circle—while marginalizing older clerics—includes Alireza Panahian,<sup>18</sup> Muhammad Mehdi Mir Baqeri,<sup>19</sup> Mohsen Qomi,<sup>20</sup> Alireza Arafii,<sup>21</sup> Ali Shirazi, Abdul Hossein Khosro Panah,<sup>22</sup> Muhammad Reza Modarresi Yazdi, Ali Qazi Askar, and Mehdi Hadavi Tehrani.<sup>23</sup>

This look at Khamenei's advisors shows the persistence of two trends: a preference for the second generation of the Islamic Republic over the first and an inclination to seek advice from friends who have been loyal and devoted over decades rather than from political operatives who might challenge his assumptions and desires. Always prevalent in Khamenei's calculus is the need to preserve and enhance his own power, a tendency that no doubt applies to his dealings with the clergy.

## NOTES

1. See the full text of Karrubi's June 19, 2005, letter to Khamenei at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/06/050619\\_karoubi-objection.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/06/050619_karoubi-objection.shtml).
2. In 2013, Hejazi was prohibited by the U.S. Department of Treasury from engaging in any transactions with American citizens and his assets and jurisdiction were frozen for "contributing to serious human rights abuses committed by the Iranian regime, including through the use of communications technology to silence and intimidate the Iranian people.... Asghar Mir-Hejazi, the Deputy Chief of Staff to the Supreme Leader, [has] used his influence behind the scenes to empower elements from Iran's intelligence services in carrying out violent crackdowns against the Iranian people." See U.S. Department of State, "United States Takes Action to Facilitate Communications by the Iranian People and Targets Iranian Government Censorship," press statement, May 30, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/05/210102.htm>.
3. In his speech on January 3, 2008, Khamenei criticized those domestic political figures who advocate direct negotiation with the United States: "Some gentlemen hang out and babble and chat and argue that the lack of relations with America is harmful to us. No sir! The lack of relations with America is useful for us. If one day relations with America become useful, I will be the first person to say relations should be resumed." This rhetoric reflects Khamenei's view that only he can understand what is in the interests of the country. See the full Persian transcript of the speech at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3415>. Khamenei's relationship with Ali Akbar Velayati, his advisor on international affairs and a former minister of foreign affairs, seems to be based on such a self-perception. Velayati, who ran unsuccessfully in the 2013 presidential campaign, criticized the country's nuclear policy during a televised presidential debate, showing that he does not endorse Khamenei's policy and suggesting that, while Khamenei may solicit Velayati's views on the significance of various countries' actions or rhetoric, he is unlikely to turn to him for advice on policy.
4. See an interview with Shirazi on Khamenei's leadership qualities at Alborz News, June 6, 2010, <http://alborznews.net/fa/pages/?cid=23021>.
5. See Abbas Shirazi's biography in Persian: *Muhammad Ali Qorbani*,

*Sardar-e Khatib ya Sairi dar Zandegui-ye Shahid Hojjatol Eslam val Moslemin Sheikh Abbas Shirazi* (Tehran: Moavenat-e Ravabet-e Omoomi va Entesharat-e Sepah-e Pasdaran, 2010).

6. For a short online biography of Abbas Shirazi and an excerpt of Khamenei's statement, see *Raha News*, November 20, 2013, <http://washin.st/1ptzZ5X>.
7. The IRGC issued a condolence statement following Hajj Assadollah's death. See the Fars News Agency report of July 13, 2008, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8704230694>.
8. On September 14, 2011, he was officially announced as the replacement for Hojjatol Eslam Ismail Saadat. See *Javan Online*, September 14, 2011, <http://washin.st/1fVfRV9>.
9. Ali Shirazi, Partovi az Khorshid: Dastan-ha-I az zendegi-e maqam-e Moazzam-e Rahbari, 21st ed. (Qom: Boostan-e Ketab, 1389 [2010]).
10. Ali Shirazi, *Sokhani Samimaneh ba Rais Jomhoo* (Qom: Khadem Alreza, 1382 [2003]).
11. On Qasem Soleimani, see Ali Alfoneh, "Iran's Most Dangerous General," *Middle Eastern Outlook* no. 4 (American Enterprise Institute, July 2011), <http://www.aei.org/outlook/101063>.
12. Ahmad Marvi mentioned this fact in a March 7, 2009, interview with the *Jam-e Jam* newspaper, <http://www.jamejamonline.ir/papertext.aspx?newsnum=100900884811>.
13. Hadi Marvi died in September 2007 in Mashhad. See the September 9, 2007, *Mehr News* report at <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=548828>. For a short biography of Khazali, see the Meybod Seminary website, <http://www.howzeh-meybod.ir/main/fa/khazali>.
14. See the June 3, 2011, interview with Jabari on the Alef website, <http://alef.ir/1388/content/view/106164/>.
15. For a study on the clerical establishment in postrevolutionary Iran, see Mehdi Khalaji, *Nazm-e Novin-e Rohaniyat dar Iran* (The New Order of the Clerical Establishment in Iran), 3rd ed. (London: Mardomak, 2011).
16. See the *Mehr News* report of July 12, 2011, <http://old.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsId=1357932>. For another report on pilgrims to Jamkaran, see interview with Jamkaran mayor Amin Moghavemi, *Bright Future News*, <http://www.bfnews.ir/vdccesq1.2bqem8laa2.html>.

17. For the full text of his speech in Persian, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=10357>.
18. Panahian is a hardline preacher who frequently appears on state television and leads religious rituals at Basij gatherings. See his website: <http://panahian.ir/>.
19. Born in 1961, Baqeri heads the Islamic Sciences Academy of Qom, which is in charge of Islamizing all forms of knowledge, even the exact sciences. See the academy's website: <http://www.isaq.ir/>.
20. Born in 1960, Qomi is now a member of the Assembly of Experts and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution. He is also the Supreme Leader's advisor on Iranian students abroad.
21. Born in 1959, Arafī is the Supreme Leader's appointee as Friday prayer imam in Meybod and president of Al-Mustafa International University in Qom. See the university's website: <http://en.miu.ac.ir/index.aspx?siteid=4>.
22. Born in 1967, Panah now heads the Institute for Research on Theosophy and Philosophy (formerly the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy). See the website: <http://www.irip.ir/>.
23. Born in 1961, Tehrani is Khamenei's religious representative in the Supreme Leader's permanent offices in Mecca and Medina. See Tehrani's official website: <http://www.hadavi.info/fa>.



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## KHAMENEI vs THE CLERGY

BEFORE THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION, the clerical establishment enjoyed partial autonomy from the Iranian government and, in this capacity, wielded significant influence. But since 1979, that influence has steadily flagged as socioreligious and political authority have become conjoined. Ayatollah Khamenei has been a central agent in propelling this process, bringing clerics under state control through a bureaucratic effort that has fundamentally reshaped the role and character of the religious class within the state.

Indeed, Khamenei's broad control over the clerics is outlined in his job description. In the postrevolution landscape, Iran's Supreme Leader is not only the head of the judiciary and the intelligence community, as well as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but also the head of the country's clerical establishment.

Given the risks associated with publicly opposing or criticizing the Islamic Republic, clerics have generally been reluctant to do so. This reluctance is related, in part, to the Supreme Leader's religious authority. In the early days of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini was declared a jurist unlike any other. This elite status, later applicable to Khamenei, comes with a range of coercive instruments. Most notorious is an entity known as the Special Court of Clerics (*Dadgah-e Vizbeh-ye Rouhaniat*), established in 1987, which works separately from the judicial system and whose head is appointed by the Supreme Leader. Since the founding of the Special Court of Clerics, legal procedure has largely been disregarded in Iran and hundreds of clerics throughout the country have been imprisoned and executed. The Special Court operates under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader and does not

follow the juridical procedures and laws holding sway in the rest of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Since its establishment, the court has become well known for its brutal and humiliating treatment of clerics of all ranks. Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari<sup>2</sup> was one of many “tried” in this court. While he was accused of involvement in a military coup to overthrow the Iranian government and assassinate Khomeini, his real “crime” was attempting to challenge Khomeini’s legitimacy as a ruling jurist. His dossier was ultimately closed but only after many of his followers and relatives were arrested or executed, and after Shariatmadari himself was paraded on state television after making a public “confession” and begging for Khomeini’s pardon. He died under house arrest in 1986.

In addition to the court, the Islamic Republic has developed a range of mechanisms for enforcing its rule within the clerical establishment. The state’s assumption of direct responsibility for the day-to-day management of clerical institutions, in particular, has fundamentally altered the clergy’s access to financial resources. Relatedly, much of the property that previously belonged to Iran’s traditional religious authorities has been confiscated and now is under the control of the Supreme Leader. For example, the House of Islamic Propaganda (*Dar al-Tabligh*), initially owned by Ayatollah Shariatmadari, became a base for the Office for Islamic Propaganda (*Daf-tar-e Tablighat-e Islami-e Qom*), the head of which is appointed by the Supreme Leader.<sup>3</sup>

Another instrument for government control over the clerics is the so-called Imam Jafar Sadeq 83 Independent Brigade, which consists of “guerrilla” clerics who wear a military uniform and a turban. The Brigade’s goal is to ensure that voices emerging from the seminaries echo the government line—and to repress voices that go astray.<sup>4</sup> Another institution, the Statistical Office, listed as part of the Center for the Management of the Seminaries, acts on behalf of the Intelligence Ministry and monitors clerics in both their private and public lives. The Intelligence Ministry’s deputy on clerical affairs, as well as the Office of the Supreme Leader’s deputy on clerical relations, plays a similarly significant role in controlling the clergy through political and ideological means.

Under Khamenei, control over the seminaries has been greatly tightened. The Supreme Council for Seminaries<sup>5</sup> was established in 1994 to regulate policy planning, seminary issues, and religious education, and to prevent “penetration of foreigners in seminaries and [protect] clerics against the influence of deviant currents and [create] a consulting center for guiding clerics.” The seminaries in Qom, Mashhad, and all other Iranian cities are administered by the Supreme Council for Seminaries, whose members must prove their absolute allegiance to the Supreme Leader before being appointed. Today, influential members of the nine-person council include Ayatollah Muhammad Yazdi, former head of the judiciary; Ayatollah Morteza Moqtadai, former attorney general and the executive director of the seminaries; Ayatollah Muhammad Momen, former head of the Islamic Revolution Supreme Court and currently a member of Guardian Council; and Ayatollah Reza Ostadi, who also serves on the Assembly of Experts. According to the council’s charter, *marjas* who believe in the absolute authority of the ruling jurist (Supreme Leader) can also participate in the appointment or dismissal processes for the council’s members. In practice, this scenario leaves the Supreme Leader as the only real authority with the power to shape the council in his own favor.

Khamenei’s centralization of the seminary bureaucracy has entailed a dramatic shift from a traditional order based on oral culture to a modern, digitized system that exerts control over clerics’ private lives, public activities, and political orientation. Whether a cleric believes in the legitimacy of *velayat-e faqih* or is a direct beneficiary of the Islamic Republic is irrelevant: all clerical affairs must now run within the framework defined by Khamenei. For instance, *marjas* once had their own independent registry office for depositing clerics’ monthly payments, giving them the freedom to pay whatever amount to whomever they wanted. Now they must follow the guidelines of the Supreme Council for Seminaries, which are computerized and centralized through the Center for the Management of Qom Seminaries (which generally supervises other seminaries too). Payments by *marjas* to clerics, as well as any payments from one religious institution to another, ultimately require approval from the Supreme Leader’s representatives. The Center for the Management of Qom Seminaries also maintains a comprehensive data-

base of the *marjas*' properties, assets, and income, information the Supreme Leader uses to manage the *marjas*' financial activities. Furthermore, while clerics could previously study or teach in seminaries without bureaucratic permission, seminaries are now governed by a more restrictive, university-like arrangement.

Even those *marjas* who do not depend directly on the government must comply financially with the government's system. One prominent such example is Ayatollah Sistani of Najaf, Iraq, who has always enjoyed considerable autonomy from the Iranian hierarchy and who represents a comparatively more traditional view of Shiism. This influential cleric cannot operate his office or manage his religious-financial network within Iran (and, in some cases, in other countries in the Middle East such as Lebanon and Syria) without cooperating with the Iranian government.

The financial story has another dimension. Before the revolution, ordinary clerics depended on *marjas* for their livelihood. Today, however, most clerics also receive financial support through institutions run by the state and the Supreme Leader. In order to demonstrate his financial and religious supremacy, Ayatollah Khamenei pays much higher salaries to clerics than the *marjas* do. Yet even the Supreme Leader's salary added to the *marjas*' payments would not amount to a sufficient income for a cleric. In reality, clerics earn the larger proportion of their money through their work for governmental or semigovernmental institutions or their involvement in various kinds of business. While most *marjas* supposedly rely on the proceeds from religious taxes that they assess, the Supreme Leader presides over the wealthiest and most profitable economic institutions in Iran, such as the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled, the Imam Reza Shrine, and affiliated entities. Today, religious *marjas* combined provide for only a small percentage of the clerics' financial needs. By contrast, the government—and Khamenei himself—is primarily in charge of financial issues in Shiite seminaries, especially in Iran. As such, the economic role and authority of the *marja* has been systematically reduced, just as the Islamic Republic's authority and power over Shiite financial networks has been enhanced.

In just the city of Qom, the seminaries are accompanied by more than four hundred religious institutes<sup>6</sup> that engage in Islamic

research or propaganda. Dozens of similar institutes operate in cities like Mashhad and Isfahan, joined by community centers and libraries, all of which form a network established since the Islamic Revolution with the principal aim of propagating an ideology favored by the republic. Of course, all must cooperate with the Supreme Council for Seminaries. The government actively uses these entities to promote ideas conducive to its goals while sidelining those ideas and religious teachings that are not. This system has ultimately allowed the Islamic Republic to dominate the intellectual life of Iran's clerical establishment, especially since the deaths of the grand ayatollahs Abu al-Qasem Khoi, Mohammad Reza Golpayegani, and Shahab al-Din Marashi Najafi, all eminent scholars who opposed many aspects of Khomeini's agenda. The role of traditional centers of religious authority—which operated as a religious and political check on the newly formed hierocracy—correspondingly went into steep decline, and a younger generation of clerics reared in Khomeini's republic came to occupy positions of great religious and political influence.

For clerics in general, whether on the government payroll or not, a wide array of amenities and privileges are available. The government underwrites a hefty budget for religious institutions, making today's Iranian clerical establishment the wealthiest of any period in history. Well-connected clerics and *marjas* within the Islamic Republic are involved in lucrative business deals, receive exclusive governmental benefits, and can borrow large amounts of money from banks without sufficient guarantees for repayment. Many charities owned by *marjas* in Iran and high-ranking clerics engage in business through corrupt dealings with the government.

The Khomeinist doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* requires that all clerics be subject to the orders of the Supreme Leader and jurist, just as any other Shiite worshiper would be. This doctrine is premised on the view that the ruling jurist is the heir of the Prophet Muhammad and the representative of the infallible Hidden Imam, benefiting from all their divine authorities. The Supreme Leader thus has the authority over matters beyond sharia and the country's constitution, granting him—at least in principle, though there are always limits in practice—enormous powers over society in general and the hierocracy in particular. According to Khomeini, expediency and government

interest overrule all Islamic laws, which justifies the ruling jurist's authority over matters beyond sharia or the constitution. In this vein, some have contended that *marjas* cannot use religious taxes without the approval of the ruling jurist. In addition, it has been argued that "fatwas issued by *marjas* that deal with public issues can come into practice only after the approval of the ruling jurist."<sup>7</sup>

Within the Islamic Republic, what an individual jurist believes or the quality of his scholarship is of little significance; what matters most is how, within the structure of the hierocracy, the ruling jurist chooses to define his relationship to other individual jurists. In other words, jurists do not deal with the Supreme Leader and his office as a fellow or even as a superior member of a religious community but instead as the head of an expansive military-economic-political corporation.

Rewards are abundant for members of this corporation who are in good standing. The very constitution of the Islamic Republic is based on discrimination that favors clerics. For instance, the head of the government, the head of the judiciary, all the members of the Assembly of Experts, the six clerical members of the Guardian Council, the minister of intelligence, and several other positions must be *mujtahids*, or jurists. A secular democratic government that removed all discrimination, including policies favoring clerics, would not be an ideal government for the overwhelming majority of jurists and clerics, whether they like the existing political system or not. What the Iranian people might consider an ideal alternative to the current system is not so idyllic for most clerics. The Islamic Republic has systematically sought to deprive clerics of their independence and tarnish their reputations. Despite this fact, the Islamic Republic is still widely viewed as the most favorable government for clerics in the history of Islam.

Khamenei's relationship with the clerical establishment, therefore, contains a certain paradox in which religious freedom is suppressed and yet members of the clergy are rewarded for their compliance with established expectations. More broadly, this relationship shows how clerics' religious views have been marginalized in favor of their utility within the state's increasingly sophisticated apparatus of control.

## NOTES

1. For an official account of the history of the court, see Seyed Muhammad Zaman Daryabari, *Dadsara va Dadgah-e Vizbeh-ye Rouhaniyat* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1383 [2004]). For a critical account and legal examination of the court, see Emad Addin Baqi, *Rouhaniyat va Qodrat, Jameeh Shenasi-e Nahad-ha-ye Dini* (Tehran: Nashr Saraee, 1383 [2004]), pp. 251–88.
2. On Shariatmadari's case, see Mohsen Kadivar's well-documented study "On Ayatollah Shariatmadari," published on his website: <http://kadivar.com/?p=10846>.
3. See the Office for Islamic Outreach's official website: <http://www.dte.ir/Portal/Home/>.
4. See Ayatollah Khamenei's speech of December 2, 1991, addressing the members of the Brigade: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2518>. In his memoir, Rafsanjani indicates that the Brigade had been trying to break free of IRGC control; it did not succeed in doing so. See Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Payan-e Defa va Aghaz-e Bazsazi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1367* (1988) (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 1390 [2011]), p. 327.
5. See the Supreme Council for Seminaries: <http://www.ismc.ir/>.
6. This estimate comes from Hamid Makarem, who heads the Foreign Ministry's office in Qom. See his statement on the Al-Mustafa International University website: <http://miu.ac.ir/index.aspx?siteid=14&pageid=4898&newsview=4088>.
7. On the relationship between the ruling jurist and other *marjas*, see Mesbah-Yazdi's views: <http://mesbahyazdi.org/farsi/?..lib/velayat/ch06.htm>; also see Khamenei's fatwa: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/treatise-content?uid=1&tid=8>.

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## KHAMENEI vs THE PRESIDENT

AMONG THE MOST INTRIGUING relationships for the Supreme Leader, and a highly pertinent one given the election of Hassan Rouhani, is that with the president of the Islamic Republic. Before the June 2013 election, Khamenei had served alongside three presidents, each of whom spent eight years in office. Given the continuing strength of Khamenei's leadership, one can deduce, at least, that he has successfully checked the influence wielded by the president. And, as we will see, when the president's power is uncomfortably ascendant, the Supreme Leader and his peers are not beyond hinting at a change in the Islamic Republic's entire system of government.

The relationship between the Supreme Leader and the president in the Islamic Republic tends to be dichotomous, as each figure's legitimacy issues from a different source: the president's from nationwide elections and the Supreme Leader's from the divine. The president holds office for four years and is limited to two sequential terms, while the Supreme Leader's position is permanent. As such, tensions between these two leaders are inevitable.

Historically, to be president of Iran is not to be in a favorable position. The first president of the Islamic Republic, Abol Hassan Bani Sadr, received 78.9 percent of the vote only to see his authority challenged by Khomeini, who expected Bani Sadr to be a simple facilitator of his and the clerical establishment's aims for the country. After a tension-filled year and a half, Bani Sadr was dismissed by Khomeini. Bani Sadr succeeded in fleeing the country, as did many of his associates, but still others were either killed or imprisoned by the Islamic Republic. (To this day, Bani Sadr remains exiled in France.) In the subsequent presidential election, the vic-



tor was Muhammad Ali Rajai, an Islamist with ties to Khomeini. But Rajai's fate was even bleaker than that of his predecessor: just a few months into his tenure, he was assassinated, along with Prime Minister Muhammad Javad Bahonar, in a bombing of the prime minister's office. This event paved the way for Khamenei to become the first cleric to be president of the Islamic Republic. But even his power over eight years in office was reduced to near-ceremonial status, owing to the dominant executive role played by Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi. Even in the context of the Iran-Iraq War, Khamenei's position was secondary to that of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Supreme Leader's deputy as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. And in 1988, when thousands of Iranian political prisoners were murdered, Khamenei was unaware of what had even happened, according to Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who protested the government's role in the massacre.

After Khamenei became Supreme Leader in 1989, his clashes with the country's presidents were different in character from those of Khomeini because he lacked his predecessor's charisma and religious and political credentials. As a result, he was compelled to devise a sophisticated system in which the president's power was inherently limited. And indeed, over time, this system has had the effect of gradually reducing the president's power and capabilities to the benefit of the Supreme Leader. As such, the presidential institution has been weakened, along with its prospects to serve as a strong democratic counterweight to the religious leadership.

Until Rouhani's election, the three presidents to serve alongside Khamenei were Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Each case testifies to Khamenei's ability to keep a president in power while simultaneously weakening him by allowing the country's judiciary and intelligence apparatus to accuse members of the president's circle of either economic or moral corruption, or of connection with opposition movements or Western powers. Khamenei has also used his power to prevent the president from achieving his stated goals during his presidential campaign, thus undermining his credibility.

When Khomeini died, the general impression both inside and outside Iran was that Khamenei was less anti-American than his

predecessor and that, along with Rafsanjani, he could open a new chapter in the Islamic Republic's history. Of course, the share of power held by the two was hardly equal. Even though the position of prime minister was abolished in the revised constitution of 1989, apportioning more authority to the president, the new Supreme Leader took immediate steps to consolidate his power, in political, security, and economic terms. He did so by establishing ties with the Intelligence Ministry, armed forces, state media, and groups such as the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled. Another factor aiding Khamenei's consolidation of power was Rafsanjani's resignation, within a few months, as deputy commander-in-chief of the armed forces, leaving the command to the Supreme Leader alone. During Rafsanjani's second term, which began in 1993, Khamenei began using the various institutions over which he exercised control to pressure Rafsanjani's government either directly or indirectly. Pro-Khamenei groups, ranging from the Basij militia to various conservatives, were enlisted to criticize Rafsanjani's cultural and economic policies, weakening his position and harming his popularity.

Rafsanjani ultimately struck back at these attempts to undermine his position by allying himself with reformists in support of Mohammad Khatami as his successor in 1997, against Khamenei's obvious support for his rival Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri. These reformists, who came to embody a modern, pro-Western Iran, had previously been hardline leftists but were transformed by their eight years of political exile, brought about by Khamenei himself. Resentment from Iranians over the government's oppressive policies had largely driven the shift. Although at first stunned by the rejection, Khamenei and his allies soon took action. They paralyzed the Khatami government by shuttering newspapers, closing the political space, suppressing students, killing intellectuals, and persecuting government officials such as the powerful technocratic Tehran mayor, Gholam Reza Karbaschi. Khatami's exceptional popularity did not help him retain influence in either foreign or domestic politics.

Following Khatami's two terms, Khamenei demonstrated his potency by enabling the 2005 victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an almost unknown candidate. Ahmadinejad's election was intended to sideline both the reformists led by Khatami and the technocrats

led by Rafsanjani. Meanwhile, Khamenei decided to take control of Iran's nuclear policy, which from 1989 to 2005 had been determined by consensus among the political elite. In co-opting the nuclear file, Khamenei needed both to portray previous policies as ineffective and to present an alternative policy for the future. And he believed Ahmadinejad would be a good fit to carry out this plan. But for Khamenei, picking Ahmadinejad would turn out to be costly. The new president not only ultimately failed to align himself with Khamenei, he also began promoting a new nationalist, anticlerical agenda, effectively using Khamenei's resources to challenge the Supreme Leader's authority and to establish his own economic network and sphere of influence. This eventual rift between the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad warrants a closer inspection, including the intimate ties between Khamenei's camp and the IRGC.

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#### DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH

When Ahmadinejad entered office, he provided the IRGC, the clerical establishment, and all other foundations and organizations under Khamenei with unprecedented economic privileges, as an attempt to repay his debt to the Supreme Leader for bringing him to power. This included allocating hefty budgets in their favor and awarding big contracts without a bidding process or observance of standard government procedure. However, starting in 2009, Ahmadinejad began pulling back from his financial favoritism, a shift rooted in the president's need to establish an independent power center and to build up his own financial network. After issuing permission to create several private banks, however, Ahmadinejad drew objections from his more conservative critics that he was failing to follow proper legal procedure.<sup>1</sup> Yet the spillover economic activities associated with private banks, including their affiliated companies, real estate investments, and management of imports and exports, helped create a new financial sphere of influence for the president and his close advisor Esfandiar Rahim Mashai.<sup>2</sup>

The banks would spawn more controversy still. Critics alleged that several figures who had obtained permission to open the banks had received millions of dollars in loans, often from public banks, that they had failed to repay. And in 2011, the Iranian judiciary

accused Mah Afarid Khosravi of engaging in corruption to the tune of \$3 billion—the largest such corruption charge in the history of the Iranian economy. Seven banks were implicated; the license of the private Aria Bank was revoked and its president, Amir Mansour Aria, was arrested. According to speculation, several members of Ahmadinejad's circle, including Mashai and former vice president Muhammad Reza Rahimi, may have been involved, but at Khamenei's request were spared a court appearance in order to save face for the Islamic Republic.

A pivotal moment in the escalating tensions between the Supreme Leader and the president occurred on April 17, 2011, when Ahmadinejad dismissed Intelligence Minister Haydar Moslehi from his position.<sup>3</sup> Moslehi had close ties to both Khamenei and the military establishment, and Khamenei asked the president to reverse his decision, a request Ahmadinejad ignored. When Khamenei was forced to send the minister a letter directly asking him to reassume his position, the president demonstrated his apparent frustration by staying home and refusing to attend cabinet meetings for twelve days. It was only after Khamenei sent him threatening messages that Ahmadinejad resumed his work in the president's palace. Yet Ahmadinejad persisted in his opposition to Moslehi, dismissing him on June 12 from the Council for Money and Credit, the main body in charge of economic policy planning. Some critics saw these moves as reflecting Ahmadinejad's bid to create his own financial empire without any accountability before the law. In reality, Ahmadinejad—as implied earlier—was seeking to extricate himself from his former financial dependence on Khamenei's camp and the IRGC. In the end, Ahmadinejad seems to have believed that he needed Khamenei to rise to power but that reliance on the Supreme Leader was hampering his maintenance of power. And, in a word, political self-reliance would not be possible without economic self-reliance.

In July 2011, Ahmadinejad went on the offensive, accusing the IRGC of smuggling legal and illegal goods through the country's key ports. The president thus proved that he was willing to target the Supreme Leader's financial resources and challenge his economic preeminence. Ahmadinejad took aim at individuals "connected to

the network of masters of power and influence,” who he claimed were selfish, immoral, and greedy, and who wanted to gain wealth by any means, “even if that wealth is *haram*.”<sup>4</sup>

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#### AHMADINEJAD’S POLITICAL COST TO THE SUPREME LEADER

In political terms, the cost to the Supreme Leader of having Ahmadinejad as president became apparent in the tumultuous aftermath of the June 2009 presidential election. Although the state media and other propaganda agents that were beholden to Khamenei, as well as to the Majlis and the judiciary, did not hesitate to criticize Ahmadinejad or his inner circle, Khamenei’s stated support for the widely disputed electoral outcome harmed both his personal image and that of the Islamic Republic. In using violence against peaceful demonstrators, and cracking down on journalists and civil activists, the government incurred the disapproval of Muslims abroad, particularly after the killing of peaceful demonstrators on the Shia holy day of Ashura. Many now questioned the religious legitimacy of the Islamic Republic’s actions. So, once the scene had calmed, Khamenei was in the position of needing to discredit the man whose dubious election victory he had supported—and even killed for.

Ahmadinejad’s rivalry with the Majlis was no less divisive than his rivalry with Khamenei. Indeed, it was unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic. Many members of parliament claimed that had it not been for Khamenei’s support, they would have sought early on to impeach Ahmadinejad, who accused the parliament of sabotaging the government’s plans and systematically ignored its decisions. A moment of high drama occurred when the Majlis tried to impeach the minister of labor and social welfare, and Ahmadinejad responded by playing a videocassette for the members of parliament in which Fazel Larijani, the brother of both the Majlis speaker and the judiciary chief, was seen making illegal financial demands of Said Mortazavi, the former general prosecutor of Tehran. The implication was that the judiciary and Majlis were seeking to weaken Ahmadinejad not for legitimate political reasons but to obscure their own corrupt practices—and because Ahmadinejad himself was a leader who targeted corruption.

## INTENSIFYING FACTIONALISM

Ayatollah Khamenei's initial motivation for backing Ahmadinejad was at least twofold. Not only was he seeking to marginalize the first generation of the Islamic Republic, along with reformists and technocrats, but he also wanted to forge a kind of unity between the presidency and clerical leadership, which had previously been split. In Khamenei's version of unity, the president would be a loyal and subservient figure who both guided a democratically legitimate institution to serve the interests and agendas of the Supreme Leader and, of course, would never challenge the Supreme Leader's authority. But Ahmadinejad did challenge the Supreme Leader's authority—and he invoked his democratic legitimacy toward this end. In his 2012 Nowruz message, he implicitly warned Khamenei not to interfere in the coming presidential election.

To be sure, Khamenei will not rely on President Rouhani in the same way he sought to rely on Ahmadinejad in the early years of his presidency. For one thing, the dynamic between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad ultimately damaged both. For another, Ahmadinejad's mismanagement and arrogance provoked tensions with other branches of the government, forcing Khamenei to intervene in areas from which he would typically keep his distance, such as the economy.<sup>5</sup> Khamenei was also compelled to assert on several occasions that only he was authorized to make decisions on foreign policy and the nuclear issue. Muhammad Emami Kashani, Tehran's Friday prayer imam, echoed such statements, proclaiming that all questions associated with U.S.-Iran relations should be left to the Supreme Leader and not discussed by presidential candidates.<sup>6</sup>

The preelection statements by Rafsanjani on May 5, 2013, evinced an awareness of the risks of a contentious rapport between the president and Supreme Leader. In response to student requests that he run, he said, "I will not run for election without [the Supreme Leader's] approval because if he does not agree, the result would be counterproductive."<sup>7</sup> Such a statement reflected Rafsanjani's belief in the ultimate power of Khamenei and the inevitable failure of any president who seeks to propagate differing views on major policies.

The Supreme Leader's stance on presidential power, meanwhile, has generally become less permissive over the past two and a half

decades. During the Rafsanjani years, the Supreme Leader had not fully consolidated his power, but both Khatami and Ahmadinejad complained about their limited authority. Khatami sent a bill to the Majlis aimed at expanding the president's authority, but the Guardian Council rejected it. Khamenei, to the contrary, believed the president had *too much* power—enough perhaps to put his own authority at risk. On October 16, 2011, Khamenei said,

Today our [political] system is presidential. That said, people directly elect a president. So far, it has been a good way. If we feel in the near or distant future—probably not in the near future—that instead of a presidential system, a parliamentary system works better—as in some countries—that could be okay; the Islamic Republic can change this geometric line to another.<sup>8</sup>

Around the same time, Hamid Reza Katouzian, Tehran's representative in the Majlis, said supportively, "Recently, some political theoreticians arrived at a theory; our country is blessed by [God's gift of] *velayat-e faqih* and the Supreme Leader. Therefore, there is no need for a president in the country."<sup>9</sup> In the fall of 2011, Rafsanjani implicitly criticized Khamenei's statement by saying, "Abolishing the people's elected president will weaken the republican nature of the regime."<sup>10</sup>

In March 2013, the debate over a presidential versus a parliamentary system continued in a session of the Assembly of Experts, as expressed to the Rasa News Agency by Sayyed Abdul Hadi Hosseini Shahroudi, the assembly's representative from Golestan province.<sup>11</sup> An actual shift to a parliamentary system would require amending the constitution, which in turn could only be effective after a referendum. Given the present political scene, in which the government is seeking to avoid unnecessary and possibly crisis-inducing elections and in which elites are increasingly struggling to reach internal consensus, the costs of amending the constitution might be perceived by the regime as too great. But the very fact that Khamenei has voiced an implicit wish to abolish the people's elected president reveals his frustration with the present system and the president's ability to challenge him.

Such a relationship to the presidency has persisted into Rouhani's administration. The Supreme Leader may indeed have made state-

ments in support of the right of the “anti-Islamic Republic” bloc to cast its votes, but that does not mean he is looking forward to an open debate with Iran’s voices of relative moderation. Moreover, Rouhani, however surprising his victory may have been, is unlikely to elicit leniency should he attempt to chart a course at odds with Khamenei’s vision.

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## NOTES

1. Ahmadinejad’s critics asserted that permission for the creation of private banks should be granted through the Council for Money and Credit. But neither this council nor the central bank was aware of such permission ever being given to the banks authorized by Ahmadinejad. In other words, the central bank, tasked with overseeing Iran’s banking system, had been bypassed by the president in his effort to create a network of favored private banks.
2. A June 15, 2012, editorial authored by Hossein Shariatmadari in the hardline *Kayhan* newspaper, which is known as a powerful mouthpiece of the Supreme Leader, claimed that private banks such as Tat, Aria, Gardeshgari, and Sharq were among those created to strengthen the president’s financial network. Shariatmadari—Khamenei’s representative at *Kayhan*—also accused the “deviant current” of engaging in economic corruption and sabotaging the country’s banking system.
3. On these tensions, see Editorial, *Kayhan*, “Who Should Be Dismissed?” April 19, 2011, <http://kayhanarch.kayhan.ir/900130/2.htm#other201>. Ismail Kowsari, a Majlis member, claimed that Ahmadinejad dismissed the minister of intelligence so that he himself could occupy the position for a few months: see Kowsari, “Ahmadinejad Dismissed Moslehi in order to Be in Charge of the Intelligence Ministry Himself,” *Aftab News*, May 11, 2011, <http://aftabnews.ir/vdcdk50ffyt0xz6.2a2y.html>.
4. Gholam Reza Mesbahi Moghaddam, an influential member of the Majlis, accused Ahmadinejad of trying to usurp control of the Endowment and Charity Organization, which is “against Islamic law.” The organization is one of the richest in the country and is under the direct supervision of the Supreme Leader.
5. Reports indicate that Khamenei asked the heads of the three branches of government to hold weekly sessions in his office on the economy. Such meetings continued after Rouhani took office. On the latest



reported meeting focused on the “resistance economy,” see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=25438>.

6. Interview with Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, May 6, 2013, <http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/109753>. See the full transcript in Persian at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=17597>. “MP: Some People Believe There Is No Need for President,” BBC Persian, September 21, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/09/110921\\_l39\\_katouzian\\_president\\_prime-minister.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/09/110921_l39_katouzian_president_prime-minister.shtml).
7. See Rafsanjani’s remarks on May 6, 2013: <http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/109753>.
8. For the transcript of the speech in Persian, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=17597>.
9. “MP: Some People Believe There Is No Need for President,” BBC Persian, September 21, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/09/110921\\_l39\\_katouzian\\_president\\_prime-minister.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/09/110921_l39_katouzian_president_prime-minister.shtml).
10. According to Rafsanjani, during the 1989 revision of the constitution, certain members of the assembly promoted a parliamentary system, but Khamenei strongly opposed these efforts and advocated a presidential system. See Rafsanjani’s remarks: <http://www.rahesabz.net/story/51311/>. “MP: Some People Believe There Is No Need for President,” BBC Persian, September 21, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/09/110921\\_l39\\_katouzian\\_president\\_prime-minister.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/09/110921_l39_katouzian_president_prime-minister.shtml).
11. “Discussing a Parliamentary versus a Presidential System,” Rasa News Agency, March 4, 2013, <http://www.rasanews.ir/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=158960>.

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## KHAMENEI vs POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

JUST AS KHAMENEI HAS INTENSIFIED his interventions with the president over the past two and a half decades, he has increasingly intervened in the activity of other political institutions, including parliament.<sup>1</sup> This has been the case despite an early complaint, in 1989, by the predominantly leftist Majlis over Khamenei's intervention in its affairs.<sup>2</sup> He asserts his priorities and redlines not only through the Guardian Council but also by sending direct messages, sometimes written but more often verbal, to the Majlis speaker. This activity underscores both the breadth of the Supreme Leader's influence in state affairs and the blurring of lines between the supposedly theocratic and legislative wings of Iran's leadership.

A parliament member, for example, recently revealed that without Khamenei's direct instruction, parliament would not have voted for several of Ahmadinejad's proposed ministers in 2009. And when parliament attempted to impeach the minister of labor and social welfare, the Supreme Leader dictated in a letter that the impeachment should not go forward.<sup>3</sup> On December 6, 2012, Majlis speaker Ali Larijani stated in the ninth Majlis (2012–2016) that the legislative body tries to “take the path of the late Imam—which is the straight path—and follow the words of the Supreme Leader... The ninth Majlis is committed to the obedience of the Supreme Leader and the general policies designed by him.”<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, in a meeting in early 2013, the Supreme Leader offered detailed solutions for the country's economic crisis to both the cabinet and the Majlis.<sup>5</sup>

The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which lately has extended its reach into the domestic and foreign policy realms,

has given the Supreme Leader another powerful tool to advance his agenda. As outlined in the 1989 revision of the Iranian constitution, this council consists of the president (its nominal head), Majlis speaker, chief of the judiciary, president's deputy on planning and strategic supervision, chief of staff of the armed forces, commander-in-chief of the army, IRGC commander-in-chief, minister of foreign affairs, minister of intelligence, and minister of interior. Other ministers may be invited to the council's meetings if the subject matter requires their expertise. Given that the intelligence, interior, and foreign affairs ministers are usually selected by the Supreme Leader and not the president, that leaves only two democratically elected members on the council: the president and the Majlis speaker. The rest rely on Khamenei for their authority. Khamenei appoints the secretary of the SNSC (now Ali Shamkhani, former minister of defense) and two representatives (Shamkhani and Saeed Jalili, who was formerly SNSC secretary).

The council, according to the constitution, is supposed to (1) design defense and security policies within the framework of policies defined by the Supreme Leader; (2) coordinate all political, intelligence, social, cultural, and economic efforts related to defense-security measures; and (3) use the country's capabilities to respond to internal and external threats. The council has no agenda independent from the will and policies of the Supreme Leader,<sup>6</sup> who is represented usually by the council's secretary—whose role prevails over that of the president. The secretary's responsibilities include leading nuclear negotiations, reporting directly to the Supreme Leader, and briefing the president at random.

An earlier chapter discussed the dismissal by Ayatollah Khomeini of his then deputy Ayatollah Ali Hossein Montazeri. Years later, under President Khatami, Montazeri ran afoul of the SNSC, which decided to put him under house arrest. Although according to Montazeri's son Ahmad the house arrest order was issued and signed by Khatami, it is widely believed that Khamenei was behind the order.<sup>7</sup> In 2003, the council freed Montazeri, clearly after Khamenei's approval.<sup>8</sup>

Khamenei's direct influence over arrests was also apparent following the June 2009 vote. In a December 25, 2012, interview with the

*Kayhan* newspaper, Ismail Ahmadi Moqaddam, the national chief of police, said that after the vote, police had intended to arrest forty prominent leaders associated with the protestors. But in the case of candidates Mehdi Karrubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, Khamenei did not allow the police to make the arrests but instead seems to have taken direct responsibility for addressing these leaders' insubordination.<sup>9</sup> According to Tehran mayor and former police chief Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, these leaders remain under house arrest not by Khamenei's direction but by that of the SNSC. Still, it is no distant leap to infer that the original request was indeed Khamenei's.<sup>10</sup>

Comparatively speaking, the council wielded some influence over Khamenei until 2005. For example, the suspension of uranium enrichment in 2004 was not Khamenei's idea—and he later expressed public regret for it. And when, in 1998, the Taliban killed several members of the Iranian consulate in Herat and some IRGC commanders asked for Khamenei's permission to attack Afghanistan in response, the council successfully convinced Khamenei that the move might have dangerous ramifications for Iran.

But since 2005, Khamenei has tried to cleanse the council of certain former elements and make it utterly devoted to his agenda. Saeed Jalili, a former intelligence official who ran unsuccessfully in the 2013 presidential election, and Ali Baqeri, a former deputy of intelligence, are close confidants of his who entered the council to take over the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1, as the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany are known. They are devoted to implementing Khamenei's agenda without any of their own and, in the process, to undermining the authority of the president and other members of the council.

In his 2011 book, *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy*, Hassan Rouhani attempts to prove that decisions made during his 2003–2005 tenure as nuclear negotiator were coordinated with and approved by the Supreme Leader, whom he quotes praising his management.<sup>11</sup> Apparently, his book was a response to attacks on Iran's nuclear policy under Rafsanjani and Khatami. Those policies were criticized as ineffective not only by Ahmadinejad but also by Khamenei. In a July 24, 2012, speech, the Supreme Leader said:

Whenever we showed flexibility toward the enemy and used certain justifications to retreat, the enemy adopted bolder positions against us. For example, at one point we said that we should not give the enemy an excuse and at another point we said that we should dispel the enemy's suspicions against ourselves. The day the statements of our government officials were contaminated with flattery for the West and Western culture, they labeled us [part of the] "axis of evil." And who did this? The person who was the embodiment of evil. The previous U.S. president—the embodiment of evil—labeled Iran [part of the] "axis of evil." When did this happen? At a time when we used to repeatedly flatter the West, America, and others in our statements. This is how they are. Regarding the nuclear issue, at a time when we cooperated with them and backed down—this really happened, although we learned a lesson from it—they advanced so much that I said in this *hussainiyah* [referring her to the part of the Supreme Leader's office where he receives the public and delivers speeches]—that if they continued like that, I would have to step in personally. And that was what I did. I had to step in. These things are not my responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

On July 30, 2012, after Khamenei had disclaimed responsibility for the previous nuclear policy, Abdul Vahid Mousavi Lari, the interior minister under Khatami, said to the Fars News Agency:

The enrichment [of uranium] and nuclear issues—from their inception until they caused problems with the West—were under the direct management of the Supreme Leader." Under Khatami, Lari continued, the interior minister himself was excluded from the committee in charge of the nuclear program, which reported to Khamenei—and "things were done by his approval.<sup>13</sup>

All the same, arguments pitting the previous and present nuclear negotiators against each other continued. On May 7, 2013, Ali Baqeri, the deputy on international affairs for the SNSC and a top nuclear negotiator, described the former negotiation team's achievements as harmful to the country's interests and said Iran could not return to that era. "Unfortunately," he said, "[Rouhani and others] attribute all these failures unjustly to the high officials, especially the Supreme Leader." Baqeri continued:

In his book, Mr. Rouhani mentions that Iran had ten redlines before the Paris negotiations but that only three of them were considered and accepted by the Europeans. How come that former team attributes its failure to the high officials of the regime? The regime [*nezam*, or “regime,” in such contexts refers to Khamenei] set up seven conditions for the Paris agreement, but in the Paris agreement only four conditions were taken into consideration. The question is why all redlines were not considered in this statement [the Paris agreement]?...Our retreats emboldened them. There was a day when our government officials would be satisfied if they allowed us to have twenty-five centrifuges in the country, but they said it was not possible. Our government officials became satisfied with having five centrifuges, but they still said it was not possible. Then our government officials became satisfied with three centrifuges, but again they said it was not possible. According to the report you heard today, we have eleven thousand centrifuges in the country. If we had continued those retreats, if we had continued that flexibility, we would have achieved none of these nuclear advances. It would have undermined the scientific vibrancy that has developed in the country over the past few years—this scientific movement, this youth, these innovations, these inventions, and the different advances we have made in various areas. This is because, first, they might have found a problem with every one of these things and, second, the nuclear industry of a country is the symbol of that country’s progress...

Another reality is that if the country judiciously resists these pressures by the enemy—particularly the sanctions and other such things—not only will their technique prove ineffective, but also it will be impossible for them to repeat such things in the future. This is because we are going through a phase, a stage. The country will go through this stage. The threats they make and the sanctions they impose will benefit nobody other than America and the Zionist regime. The others stepped into the arena because of their coercion, pressure, and other such things, or they did so as a ceremonial gesture. It is obvious that such things as coercion and pressure cannot continue. These things will only continue for a while. One of the signs is that they were forced to exempt twenty countries from the oil embargo and similar sanctions. And the other countries which were not

exempted do not want to cooperate and they are as eager as we are, if not more, to find a solution. Therefore, it is necessary to resist. These are tangible realities. None of the things that I said are abstract analyses. They are things that we can witness.<sup>14</sup>

There is probably a grain of truth in both Rouhani's and Baqeri's assessments. Although Khamenei may not have been happy with the decisions of Rouhani, Rafsanjani, or Khatami on nuclear negotiations, he was initially not in a position to challenge them. Only after Khamenei succeeded in shunting Rafsanjani and Khatami to the realm of domestic politics did he take over the nuclear policy himself and form a loyal negotiation team devoted to implementing his favored policy.

Khamenei's relationship to the Expediency Council, initially designed to mediate differences between the Guardian Council and the Majlis but in truth a tool of the Supreme Leader, is similar to that with the SNSC and the nuclear negotiators. That is, Khamenei exercises substantive control but maintains some degree of latitude in the event he wants to distance himself from a given decision. Lacking independent authority, the Expediency Council represents Khamenei's interests when deciding whether bills approved by the parliament but rejected by the Guardian Council serve the regime's interests and therefore should be ratified. The Expediency Council also devises general policies of the state that go into effect once signed by Khamenei.

Over the last twenty-five years, Rafsanjani's power as chairman of the Expediency Council has declined gradually and been filled by radical conservative elements. Particularly during Ahmadinejad's presidency, tensions between the president's team and Rafsanjani almost brought the council to complete dysfunction. Khamenei helped stoke these tensions, and on June 19, 2009, he sided explicitly with the president: "I have various differences of opinion with Hashemi [Rafsanjani], which is natural... Since the election of 2005, there were differences of opinion between him and the president. This continues today [and the] president's opinion is closer to mine."<sup>15</sup> Notable components of the split include Ahmadinejad's refusal for several years to attend the council's meetings. In 2012, rumors circulated that Rafsanjani would be replaced as chairman by another appointee—spurred by his replacement with Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani as head of the Assembly of Experts—but the rumors did not come to fruition.

These examples illustrate how Khamenei relishes his ability to assert his influence throughout the national discourse, including in institutions such as the SNSC. His reach extends, as we have seen, to political appointments and acts of censure. But he is equally keen to maintain a measure of deniability, showing once again the extent to which political fortitude—and survival—motivates his actions.

It is worth mentioning that on September 5, 2013, Rouhani tasked the Foreign Ministry with handling nuclear negotiations. As Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif explained to reporters on September 10, “The policies and decisions on [the] nuclear issue will be made in the Supreme National Security Council, but negotiations with international parties will be done by [the Foreign Ministry]. Based on necessit[y], the Foreign Ministry is authorized to take appropriate strategies and tactics for negotiations.”<sup>16</sup> In this arrangement, the SNSC still holds considerable power to shape nuclear policy and determine the direction of the talks.

Somewhat relatedly, the new president’s appointments were given a vote of confidence when Khamenei delegated his personal authority over the police to Rouhani’s minister of interior, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, who has no military background but has worked for the country’s intelligence and security apparatus. Khamenei notably did not grant the same authority to Abdullah Nuri, the minister of interior under Khatami.

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## NOTES

1. Examples of his public interventions are available at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=156> (January 24, 2005: a letter asking the Majlis not to impeach the ministers) and <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=3019> (August 5, 2000: a letter asking the Majlis not to amend the press law).
2. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Payan-e Defa and Aghaz-e Bazsazi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1367* (1988) (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 1390 [2011]), p. 288.
3. “Ali Motahhari: Had the Supreme Leader Expressed His View, We Would Not Have Impeached the Minister,” *Jahan News*, February 16, 2013, <http://jahannews.com/vdcaeunui49n0e1.k5k4.html>.
4. “Ali Larijani: Majlis Is Committed to Loyalty to the Supreme Leader,”



Mehr News Agency, December 6, 2012, <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/1759491>.

5. "Details of Economic Meeting between the Supreme Leader and Representatives of Majlis and Government," Fars News Agency, January 26, 2013, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13911107000682>.
6. See interview with Ahmad Montazeri, the son of Ayatollah Montazeri, October 5, 2010, <http://www.rahesabz.net/story/24705/>.
7. "Ahmad Montazeri: Only Supreme Leader Can Lift the House Arrest," December 27, 2013, <http://www.kaleme.com/1392/10/06/klm-169578/>.
8. During the presidential campaign, Rouhani sought to use this story to his advantage by portraying himself as the figure who lifted the house arrest order. See BBC Persian report of May 6, 2013: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/05/130506\\_ir92\\_election\\_rowhani\\_mirhosein\\_karobi\\_montazeri.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/05/130506_ir92_election_rowhani_mirhosein_karobi_montazeri.shtml).
9. "Two-Hour Interview with Gen. Ahmadi Moqaddam, Chief of Police," *Kayhan*, December 25, 2012, <http://kayhanarch.kayhan.ir/911005/p06.pdf>.
10. "Qalibaf: Supreme Council for National Security Is Responsible for the House Arrest of Mousavi and Karrubi, Not the Supreme Leader," May 6, 2013, <http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/109907>.
11. Hassan Rouhani, *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy* (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Istiratizhik [Center for Strategic Research], 2012), pp. 752–58.
12. For the transcript of the speech in Persian, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=20534>.
13. "Minister of Interior under Khatami: The Nuclear Program Was under Direct Management of the Supreme Leader," BBC Persian, July 30, 2012, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/07/120730\\_139\\_mousavi-lari\\_nuclear\\_khamenei.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/07/120730_139_mousavi-lari_nuclear_khamenei.shtml).
14. "Jalili's Deputy Criticizes Previous Nuclear Negotiation with West," Iranian Students News Agency, May 7, 2013, <http://washin.st/1pxEGvM>.
15. For the transcript of the speech in Persian, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=7190>.
16. "Zarif Says, 'SNSC Is in Charge of Decisionmaking on Nuclear Policy,'" *Etelaat*, September 10, 2013, <http://www.ettelaat.com/etiran/?p=18330>.

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## KHAMENEI'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE IRGC

OF ALL KHAMENEI'S RELATIONSHIPS with Iran's institutions, the most intricate is that with the IRGC, and particularly with its Qods Force, which operates outside the country. Over the past two and a half decades, Khamenei has transformed the IRGC from a military body into a military-political-economic and cultural complex with vast sway over the country's affairs. The Supreme Leader's interest is now in maintaining the IRGC's dominance while making sure his hegemony within the organization is not somehow undermined.

Khamenei's involvement with the IRGC might be dated to June 2, 1988, when—seeking to coordinate efforts, prevent infighting, and improve the wartime performance of the IRGC, regular military, and Basij militia—Ayatollah Khomeini appointed Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as his deputy in the armed forces.<sup>1</sup> The Supreme Defense Council (later the Supreme National Security Council) was then headed by President Khamenei and composed of figures who mainly advocated more aggressive policies, as opposed to Rafsanjani, who sought to end the war with Iraq. Khamenei's position in the council was rather minor, especially considering how his military role would evolve in later years. Although he headed the council, he did not have much authority and influence within the IRGC and, consequently, in the management of the armed forces.<sup>2</sup> And during the war itself, Rafsanjani, along with Prime Minister Mousavi and Ali Hossein Montazeri, held the bulk of responsibility for the military. Yet this didn't mean Khamenei wanted a passive role. Rafsanjani's appointment itself had been prompted by a letter from Khamenei to Khomeini expressing the need for a single figure to run “all affairs regarding armed forces—regular military, IRGC, gendar-

merie—including operations, logistics, human resources, administration, and so on.”<sup>3</sup> Khamenei apparently expected to receive the appointment himself, but Rafsanjani then had more credibility and influence within the armed forces.

The years 1988 and 1989 were busy ones for Iran. The war with Iraq ended, Ayatollah Khomeini died and was replaced by Khamenei, the constitution was amended to centralize executive power in the Office of the President and abolish the prime ministry, and the IRGC was tasked by the political elite, led by Rafsanjani, with economic projects, including postwar reconstruction. For example, Khatam al-Anbia, an engineering arm of the IRGC, had allocated a tremendous official and unofficial budget for itself during the war. Now it was enlisted in the reconstruction effort and became a major government contractor throughout the country.

A few months after Khamenei became Supreme Leader, then president Rafsanjani resigned from his position as deputy commander of the armed forces and conceded his power to Khamenei. He did so under the gravely incorrect assumption that the Iran-Iraq War’s end would mean a waning of the military role in Iranian society. In turn, Khamenei began refashioning the IRGC into not only an economic and political tool but also a potent force that would be utterly loyal to him. The IRGC’s economic and political activities were designed to occur entirely outside the scope of the government’s executive branch. Nor would the IRGC be accountable to any other governmental branch, whether economically, judicially, or politically. In a very critical statement in April 2013, Rafsanjani expressed his concerns about “the dominance of the military” in the country and its “expanding influence” over Iran’s economy and politics.<sup>4</sup> The “military” here could be seen as signaling the IRGC, and its wildly expanded national role ever since Rafsanjani himself tasked the entity with reconstruction work after the war with Iraq.

Following his general strategy for holding power, Khamenei appointed both commanders and their deputies, with the goal to decentralize power and avoid conferring undue influence on any single individual. In many cases, deputies reported (and still report) directly to him rather than to their commanders. In this way, he has been able to control the organization through parallel chan-

nels. An example of this power of appointment is apparent in the Basij Mostazafan organization,<sup>5</sup> which falls structurally under the IRGC but whose commander is appointed by Khamenei rather than the IRGC commander-in-chief.<sup>6</sup> Also demonstrating Khamenei's power within the IRGC are clerics who serve as his representatives and monitor and report to him on the organization's politics. These representatives, who enjoy authority beyond their official roles, are also responsible for approving all promotions within the IRGC.

The IRGC's control over state media is wide-ranging, from its unofficial jurisdiction over state TV and radio to print publications and cyberspace to the country's religious centers, which serve as Iran's largest social network. The foremost theme of the IRGC's corresponding propaganda is to promote Khamenei and the need for exclusive loyalty to him rather than to any specific IRGC commander. The IRGC, which also controls the country's educational system, including its universities, recently extended its reach further by attempting to create seminaries to train clerics, an odd and unprecedented move.<sup>7</sup> All these efforts are designed to advance Khamenei's agenda. Even outside Iran's borders, the government's propaganda is focused on boosting Khamenei rather than any other given personality. Perhaps one could boil this all down to propaganda, but it is hard to see how the IRGC rank-and-file and mid-level commanders could remain unaffected by the heavy focus on the Supreme Leader.

Since the IRGC perceives itself as a political-military entity different from the regular military, it believes in the legitimacy of its intervention in Iranian politics. While reformists charge that such involvement is unhealthy, IRGC officials insist that this political dimension cannot be extracted from the organization's identity. Every election season, IRGC activity in politics comes up for public debate. For example, on June 9, 2013, Gen. Masoud Jazayeri, an IRGC commander, accused the "enemies" media of suggesting that the IRGC is not responsible for protecting the Islamic Revolution and therefore should not meddle in politics. "How is it possible," he said, "for an individual or an organization that regards itself as the guardian of a living and dynamic entity called the Islamic Revolution...to be indifferent toward politics?"<sup>8</sup>

Invariably, this politicization has generated, or intensified, factionalism within the IRGC. But, to date, no evidence suggests any IRGC commander is in a position to challenge Khamenei's authority—an authority that dates to his efforts to “cleanse” the organization of the old guard, including pro-Montazeri and leftist elements, and his practice of appointing new commanders. Likewise, Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani,<sup>9</sup> who has acquired massive power even though he lacks a formal education, has not shown any signs of breakaway intentions. To the contrary, his actions suggest loyalty to Khamenei and devotion to carrying out his agenda.

Yet, while little indication exists of actual infighting within the IRGC, the recent election revealed cracks in its façade of unity. In an unprecedented move for a commander, Soleimani unofficially endorsed Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf<sup>10</sup> while many other groups or Basij figures supported Saeed Jalili.<sup>11</sup> One could argue that it was wise for Khamenei to support neither Qalibaf nor Jalili, given that tensions within the IRGC might have intensified had one of the candidates triumphed. In any case, Khamenei's withholding of an endorsement helped him maintain his control over the organization and prevent it from splintering. President Rouhani, though he is not directly affiliated with the IRGC, still has strong ties to the country's military and intelligence communities, dating back more than three decades. He therefore may well develop a close relationship with the IRGC, especially on the nuclear issue, even as he is considered an outsider unlikely to ignite infighting in the organization.

Unlike previous presidents, Rouhani seems willing neither to dominate the IRGC nor to challenge its authority and influence over various aspects of Iran's political and economic life. Instead, his approach has been to refashion the IRGC's functions by making cases to the Supreme Leader—whose role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces encompasses the IRGC—rather than taking independent initiative. Most especially, Rouhani has sought to argue to Khamenei that IRGC monopolies weaken the economy and that allowing more room for private-sector growth will ultimately improve the country's health.

Rouhani's early efforts to curb the IRGC's economic role have yielded some successes—and, so far, the IRGC has not viewed these

gestures as a threat. In this sense—as contrasted with the public objections the IRGC often voiced to Ahmadinejad’s moves—the organization seems to have remained within boundaries set by Khamenei. As for Rouhani and Khamenei’s shared motives, they may well be economic more than political. For one thing, IRGC management of economic projects has often been unprofitable for the government. For another, IRGC links to firms have created easy targets for Western sanctions and even spurred questions about the regime’s legitimacy. Rouhani, therefore, may well have convinced the Supreme Leader that a reduction in the IRGC’s economic activities could lead to improved economic management, a lifting of sanctions, and the return of foreign investment, thereby improving the economy—an issue about which Rouhani cares most deeply. But a reduced IRGC economic role can only be sustained if the nuclear talks succeed. Should the talks fail—wrecking the prospect of eased sanctions and foreign investment—Khamenei will once again rely crucially on the IRGC in the economic field.

In related areas, Rouhani did not increase the IRGC’s budget, and he cut the Basij militia’s budget for the upcoming Persian year, beginning March 2014. Compared to Ahmadinejad, Rouhani has named many fewer IRGC commanders to his cabinet.

Despite these steps, Rouhani still sees an economic role for the IRGC. In a September 16, 2013, speech, he denied “rumors” of an IRGC economic empire and criticized those seeking to portray the entity as a “rival to the people.” He emphasized:

The IRGC is not a rival to the people and private sector. It is not a contractor like any other ordinary contractor...The IRGC should undertake the significant projects that the private sector is not able to handle...The IRGC knows the government and country’s conditions very well.... We used to sell 2.5 million barrels of oil per day and now we sell less than a million in a year [and we need these sales in order] to import 7.5 million tons of wheat. Therefore, the IRGC should make efforts and share the government’s burdens.<sup>12</sup>

On the IRGC’s political role, Khamenei and Rouhani apparently see eye-to-eye. On September 17, 2013, at his meeting with IRGC commanders, Ayatollah Khamenei said,

The IRGC is the guardian of the Islamic Revolution. I do not want to suggest that “guardian” means the IRGC should be the guardian in all fields: scientific, intellectual, cultural, economic. No. The IRGC as a living entity should know what is to guard; what is the revolution; it is not necessary for the IRGC to go in the political field in order to guard it, but it has to know the political field...it is naive to reduce the challenges the revolution faces to political, partisan, and factional challenges. These are not the main challenges for the revolution. This is the fight between political factions...The main challenge for the revolution is that the revolution has offered humanity a new order... Well, you are the guardian of the Islamic Revolution; this does not mean that you should be present in all fields and realms.<sup>13</sup>

In the same speech, he discussed “heroic flexibility” in diplomacy, a reference widely interpreted as showing his approval for the new president’s policy to negotiate with the West over the nuclear crisis.

Just a day before Khamenei’s statement, Rouhani himself addressed the IRGC commanders, describing the organization as “the beloved of hearts.”<sup>14</sup> Other language was a close echo of Khamenei’s: “The IRGC should understand politics very well but should not intervene in it because it belongs to the whole Iranian nation.”The implied criticism, from both Rouhani and Khamenei, was of IRGC support to any specific political faction. Yet Rouhani’s statement must be considered as that of an insider: he has worked in the military and security apparatus of the Islamic Republic since its inception.

Perhaps the best summary of Rouhani’s approach to the IRGC can be found in an article on the Alef website, run by the prominent conservative parliamentarian Ahmad Tavakkoli. The unsigned article describes Rouhani as someone who

understands the power relations in the Islamic Republic...and knows that his success depends on the constructive engagement with influential institutions...Unlike Khatami, he does not see engagement with the IRGC as an obstacle for democracy and unlike Ahmadinejad does not look at such institutions as an impediment to his independent authority... He may have some sympathy with Khatami or Ahmadinejad, but he takes a different path and prefers not to get into tension with these institutions...[Rouhani acts in a way so that] all powerful

institutions will feel indebted to him. This is the secret to the endurance of the Islamic Republic's traditional technocrats.<sup>15</sup>

The implication here is that, in working through Khamenei, Rouhani can help the Supreme Leader achieve his goal of preventing the IRGC from attaining unchecked power, while Rouhani can avoid tangling with the IRGC over the details or direction of the talks.

On September 30, 2013, IRGC commander-in-chief Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari signaled the organization's overall loyalty to the president. He praised Rouhani's speech at the United Nations and his diplomatic initiatives in New York even while criticizing the president's phone conversation with U.S. president Barack Obama. "Mr. Rouhani and his delegation," he said, "proved in this trip that—thanks be to God—they are faithful to the principles and move forward in the direction of the Islamic Revolution framework and the policies of the regime and the Supreme Leader."<sup>16</sup> On October 4, when hardliners outside the IRGC characterized Rouhani's negotiation team harshly, Khamenei bluntly defended the negotiators: "No one should consider our negotiating team as compromisers; they are our children and the children of the revolution. They have a difficult mission and no one should seek to weaken an official who is on duty."<sup>17</sup> And even though the Foreign Ministry has been tasked with overseeing the nuclear talks, the IRGC maintains clout through its affiliation with the Supreme National Security Council, which still governs "the policies and decisions on the nuclear issue."<sup>18</sup>

In the present scene, Khamenei's somewhat reduced reliance on the IRGC to maintain his political authority has been eased by the election of a centrist president, which means reduced pressure from the Green Movement and other reformists. Needless to say, this dynamic could well change if Khamenei deems such a change necessary.

Whatever the recent developments, the IRGC will remain a key player in Iran's power structure for the foreseeable future. The organization is a standout asset for Ayatollah Khamenei and a likely interlocutor and partner for the incoming president. Whether a charismatic leader will emerge within the IRGC, and thereby change the power calculus, is always a tantalizing subject for commentators to ponder. But as of now, Khamenei's model of ruling through strategic



appointments, timely acts of “resistance,” and opportunistic public statements remains intact.

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## NOTES

1. See Khomeini’s letters: Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sabifeh-ye Noor* (Tehran: Sazman-e Chap va Entesharat-e Vezarat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Eslami, 1370 [1992]), 11: p. 519.
2. See the BBC report on Rafsanjani’s appointment as Khomeini’s deputy in the armed forces, in Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Payan-e Defa va Aghaz-e Bazsazi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1367* (1988) (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 1390 [2011]), pp. 582–84.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 653.
4. In addressing former governors, Rafsanjani revealed that Khamenei does not trust him and argued that the country’s problems cannot be solved unless Khamenei changes his policies. For details, see the BBC Persian report of April 16 2013, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/04/130416\\_ir92\\_hashemi\\_khamenei\\_election.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/04/130416_ir92_hashemi_khamenei_election.shtml).
5. The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed—a.k.a. the Resistance Force of Basij or IRGC Resistance Force (*basij* means, literally, “mobilization”)—is one of five IRGC entities in charge of recruiting and mobilizing non-IRGC members for its military and political purposes. The force was created November 26, 1979, by Ayatollah Khomeini’s official decree, and the Supreme Leader set the goal of building a “20 million person army” by seeking volunteers for service. Since then, the Basij has passed through various administrative stages and is now one of the most powerful military and political wings of the IRGC, affecting and controlling the country’s landscape in significant ways. See the official Basij website: <http://www.basij.ir>.
6. On October 4, 2009, a few months after the postelection crisis, Ayatollah Khamenei appointed Brig. Gen. Muhammad Reza Naghdi as head of the Basij. See his appointment letter at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=8144>.
7. “IRGC Wants to Found Seminary,” *Shia Online*, July 19, 2012, <http://shia-online.ir/article.asp?id=24160>.
8. “Spokesman of IRGC Defends Its Role in Politics,” *Rooz Online*, June 9, 2013, <http://www.roozonline.com/persian/news/newsitem/archive/2013/june/09/article/-5e90b57e26.html>.

9. See Ali Alfoneh, "Iran's Most Dangerous General," *Middle Eastern Outlook* no. 4 (American Enterprise Institute, July 2011), <http://www.aei.org/outlook/101063>.
10. "Kerman's Imam of Friday Prayer: Soleimani Said, 'I Vote for Qalibaf,'" Mehr News Agency, May 26, 2013, <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2063589>.
11. The Basij demonstrated its support to Jalili in various ways, including through members' presence at his campaign gatherings and letters in support of his nuclear policies. An example is University of Imam Sadeq's letter to Jalili praising his political positions: see *Raja News*, April 27, 2013, <http://rajanews.com/detail.asp?id=159717>.
12. See a textual as well as visual report on his speech at <http://president.ir/fa/71272>. The full text of his speech is available on the president's official website: <http://president.ir/fa/72305>.
13. See the full text of his speech at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=24033>.
14. See the full text at <http://president.ir/fa/72305>.
15. "The IRGC and the Key Difference between Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani," *Alef*, September 17, 2013, <http://alef.ir/vdccxoqse2bqox8.ala2.html?199006>.
16. For a report on his remarks, see <http://www.jonoubnews.ir/showpage.aspx?id=95393>.
17. See the full text of his speech at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2437>.
18. "Zarif Says, 'SNSC Is in Charge of Decisionmaking on Nuclear Policy,'" *Ettelaat*, September 10, 2013, <http://www.ettelaat.com/etiran/?p=18330>.

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## CONCLUSION

IRANIAN MONARCHS HAVE HISTORICALLY assumed despotic personalities; they have never, however, experienced omnipotence. Leaders tended to be preoccupied with consulting various centers of power and authorities within society, ranging from the clergy to landlords and tribal leaders. In order for the monarchy to make decisions, a semiconsensus—if short of a complete consensus—that served to maintain the balance of power was required. For instance, historians argue that the powerful Qajari king Nasir al-Din Shah, ruler over Iran for fifty years, would advance his agenda during periods when he sensed fragility within the clerical base. Conversely, in times of unbearable pressure from the clergy, Nasir al-Din Shah would concede.

The Islamic Republic's rise did not result in any fundamental rupture from this power model. Even Khomeini, the charismatic founder of the Islamic Republic who shaped much of the post-revolution government, would consult significant figures within the political elite as part of his decisionmaking process in order to avoid factional tensions. In one instance, while Khomeini was supporting Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, he faced considerable criticism from the conservative clergy in Qom represented by the Society of Teachers, who opposed Mousavi's economic policies. Ahmad Azari Qomi, a prominent conservative and member of the Society of Teachers, openly chastised Khomeini for his unconditional backing of the prime minister and asserted that the parliament has a legitimate right to reject Khomeini's decisions, because Khomeini's issuances were simply "advisory" and not "imperative." But just as some shahs tolerated dissent more openly than did others, so too

the Islamic Republic has seen different approaches to clerical complaints. While Khomeini put up with the likes of Qomi, Khamenei showed less tolerance toward this particular cleric, placing Qomi under house arrest until his death. Khamenei believed he could eliminate such opposition with little political cost.

The political dynamism inside the country has been essential in shaping Ayatollah Khamenei's decisionmaking. Known as a member of the right wing in the first decade of the Islamic Republic, he privately opposed the government's anti-U.S. policies and believed in direct negotiation with the Americans. In 1989, Western media hailed his leadership as a moderate victory against radicals; at the time, the dismissed and disgraced Hossein Ali Montazeri was seen to represent such radicals. The leftist-Islamists were considered harder-line toward the West, especially the United States. For instance, Ali Akbar Mousavi Khomeini, the leader of the hostage-taking students in 1979, shared with his colleagues his worries about Khamenei being too "pro-American." President Rafsanjani's diaries include dozens of examples of such expressions by leftists. Eventually, Khamenei proved his credentials as an authentic heir to Khomeini by distancing himself from his former statements in support of dialogue with the West. He correspondingly blunted the leftists' influence in parliament, the judiciary, the executive branch, and other areas of government. This political reshaping had the further benefit of allowing Khamenei to express his youthful anti-Western passions.

On the political scene, Rafsanjani was trying to open Iran to the West, and Ataollah Mohajerani, a close friend of Khamenei's, published an article in *Ettelaat* newspaper titled "Direct Negotiations."<sup>1</sup> The piece was met with a sharp backlash from leftists, and Khamenei himself responded by saying that anyone who advocated negotiation was "naïve" or intimidated by U.S. power. Previously, Rafsanjani had not taken Khamenei's ideological shift toward a hardline position very seriously. Like others, he saw that Khamenei had staked out anti-American territory in order to confiscate the political capital of the leftists and, thus, to marginalize them.

The leftists gradually became "reformists": advocates of civil society, democracy, freedom of the press, and cultural tolerance. Rafsan-

jani's circle, in turn, evolved into liberal technocrats who advocated free-market economics and integration into the globalized world. A greater ideological change was occurring, whereby the post-Iran-Iraq War generation felt decreasing identification with Islamic values. The zeitgeist did not tolerate theocratic notions and authority. Yet in the face of these changes, Khamenei only expanded and consolidated his power so that no government branch could fundamentally challenge his authority or spoil his agenda. Khamenei's anti-Western stance has become a pillar of his political identity. Relinquishing it would imperil his very legitimacy, strengthening his reformist and other opponents.

In terms of both a revolutionary movement and the clerical establishment, the Islamic Republic has complicated Iran's decisionmaking. In addition to ideological aspects, clerics' global perspectives and the political scheme within the religious community have obscured the rationale behind decisions, in turn reducing predictability. By studying Ayatollah Khamenei's statements, decisions, and gestures over the last twenty-five years, one can conclude that his current foreign policy has been closely tied to his political identity as the Supreme Leader. Changing anti-American, anti-Israel, and nuclear-resistant policies would defiantly change the power equation—and not necessarily in Khamenei's favor. He may not be able to make bold decisions to totally eliminate his critics within the government and political elite, but he has so far protected his interests by curtailing the efforts of those seeking to remodel Iran's foreign policies—especially each of the last three presidents, in three different ways.

However complicated the decisionmaking process may be in Iran, one critical factor endures: Khamenei's ability to tighten his reins on power if he feels such a step is necessary. And however much power the IRGC has accumulated over the last twenty-five years—with its corresponding ability to shift the country's political landscape to some extent—neither this organization nor any other is powerful enough to convince Khamenei to alter his fundamental worldview. As long as Khamenei rules, the prospect of a dramatic change in Iran's foreign policy, and what the country defines as its national and regional interests, is difficult to imagine.

## NOTES

1. The article was published in the *Ettelaat* newspaper on April 26, 1990; the full text of the article is quoted in Rafsanjani's memoir: Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Etedal va Pirouzi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Hashemi Rafsanjani* 1369 (1990) (Tehran: Nashr-e Maaref Enqelab, 1392 [2013]), annex. For the full text of Khamenei's speech, in which he responds to Mohajerani's article, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2304>. Mohajerani, under immense pressure, sent Khamenei a letter seeking his support. In Khamenei's response, he emphasized that "we will not take your advice." See Khamenei's letter: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=2305>.

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## APPENDIX: PROFILE OF HASSAN ROUHANI

HASSAN ROUHANI WAS BORN on December 30, 1948,<sup>1</sup> in Sorkheh, a village near Semnan.<sup>2</sup> His father, a farmer and later a merchant, encouraged him to attend seminary in Semnan, which he did for a year before moving to Qom as a teenager to study in the seminary of Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Golpayegani. In 1965, he attended high school in order to eventually go to university. This decision was in line with that of other seminarians at the time, who bristled at clerics' traditional function and wanted to avoid an austere life.<sup>3</sup> A university education allowed them to pursue other professions. Needless to say, this path often drew criticism from traditional clerics.<sup>4</sup> During Rouhani's time in seminary, he gained limited teaching experience at the university level, but he did not publish anything before the Islamic Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

In 1969, Rouhani moved from Qom to Tehran,<sup>6</sup> where he entered the University of Tehran as a law student. After receiving his bachelor's degree in juridical law, he completed his military service requirement in 1974. This step indicated his desire to practice law, as opposed to most clerics, who could invoke their military service exemption.<sup>7</sup> Around the time he passed the bar exam, Rouhani was giving religious and political speeches in various Iranian cities.<sup>8</sup> Because he only criticized the shah indirectly, he avoided imprisonment. Other members of the Society for Militant Clerics of Tehran (*Jamee-ye Rouhaniyat-e Mobarez-e Tehran*), of which Rouhani was a founding member, were arrested. These figures included Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Seyed Reza Akrami, and Muhammad Emami Kashani.<sup>9</sup> Rouhani, for his part, felt great pride to be the first person to call Khomeini "Imam" in a speech.<sup>10</sup>

As the revolution neared its climax, Rouhani traveled to Britain, where he studied English at a language center south of London. On several occasions during this period, he met Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris. Despite the pretext that Rouhani was traveling for academic reasons, he was mostly busy preaching to Europe's Muslim communities and networking with revolutionaries. He returned to Iran on February 19, 1979, a week after the victory of the revolution.

Rouhani later continued his studies at Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland, graduating with an MPhil in 1995 for the thesis "The Islamic Legislative Power with Reference to the Iranian Experience" and a PhD in law in 1999, supervised by Mahdi Zarea and Sayed Hassan Amin, for the thesis "The Flexibility of Shariah (Islamic Law) with Reference to the Iranian Experience." During these studies, he simultaneously represented Ayatollah Khomeini in the Supreme National Security Council and held several other positions, such as national security advisor to the president, member of parliament in the first through the fifth Majlis assemblies, deputy speaker of parliament, and head of the Majlis foreign policy committee.<sup>11</sup>

Rouhani's relationship to Khomeini on military matters dates to the first months after the revolution, when Rouhani visited Khomeini at his home. Khomeini—then a member of the Revolutionary Council and the Islamic Republic Party—asked Rouhani to focus on reorganizing the regular military (Artesh), which the future Supreme Leader characterized as "living in a chaotic state."<sup>12</sup> During the Iran-Iraq War, Rouhani served as a deputy to Rafsanjani, who was then commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and as commander of Iran's air defense. Rouhani was later mentioned as a participant in the 1980s talks that led to the Iran-Contra affair. Like Khomeini, Rouhani did not then have close ties to the IRGC and tended to advocate its integration with the Artesh. During the war, Rouhani was also involved in confidential arms purchases from China and the Soviet Union, and he headed Khatam al-Anbia, an IRGC engineering arm.

When Khomeini died and Rafsanjani became president, Rouhani was proposed as a possible minister of justice or intelligence. He turned down both offers, probably because he did not want to



deal with a leftist parliament led by Mehdi Karrubi.<sup>13</sup> Khamenei and Rafsanjani then formed a new entity, the Supreme National Security Council, which was mentioned in the amended constitution and for which Rouhani was named secretary by Khamenei, along with his post as the president's national security advisor.<sup>14</sup> Ever since, Rouhani has been a central force in the SNSC, and he remains the Supreme Leader's representative to this day.<sup>15</sup>

Rouhani's involvement with the nuclear program began with its resumption in the late 1980s. He officially took over the negotiation dossier under President Mohammad Khatami; under Ahmadinejad, Ali Larijani assumed the role before handing it over to Saeed Jalili. All along, Rouhani continued to advise the Supreme Leader on the issue.

Khamenei appointed Rouhani as a member of the Expediency Council in 1992, a position he still holds,<sup>16</sup> and he has been a member of the Assembly of Experts since 1999. Rouhani was announced as Iran's president after the 2013 election.

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## NOTES

1. Although Rouhani's birth certificate indicates his date of birth as November 12, 1948, Rouhani notes in his memoir that this date is incorrect. See Hassan Rouhani, *Khaterat-e Dr. Hassan Rouhani, Enqelab-e Eslami (1341–1357)* (Tehran: Majma Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam, 1390 [2011]), p. 27. Before the revolution, creating an incorrect date on a birth certificate was common in order to buy time before military service, allow for earlier entry to school, or just out of carelessness. Ayatollah Khamenei himself is an example. While his birth certificate cites his birth date as July 16, 1939, he claims he was actually born April 19, 1939. See Hedayat Allah Behboodi, *Sharh-e Esm, Zendegi Nameh-ye Ayatollah Seyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei (1318–1357)* (Tehran: Moassesseh-ye Motaleat va Pazhoohesh-ya-ye Eslami, 1391 [2012]), p. 29. Rouhani's birth certificate also lists his surname as Freidoon, matching that of his father, but after the revolution he changed his name to "Rouhani"; his birth certificate has since been amended to reflect this change.
2. Semnan is located 216 kilometers east of Tehran.
3. In his memoir, Rouhani tells of his financial struggles when entering

seminary: Hassan Rouhani, *Khaterat-e Dr. Hassan Rouhani, Enqelab-e Eslami (1341–1357)* (Tehran: Majma Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam, 1390 [2011]), pp. 96–100.

4. As recounted in Rouhani’s memoir, friends and some prominent “modernist” figures like Morteza Motahhari encouraged him to attend high school and obtain his diploma. In Motahhari’s view, as Rouhani tells it, a cleric must be acquainted with the sciences in order to respond to the ideological challenges facing Islam in the modern world. After purchasing the books, Rouhani did “not know where to hide them from others’ eyes” (Ibid., pp. 282–4).
5. His official website does not indicate any publication before the 1990s: [http://rouhani.ir/about.php?about\\_id=2](http://rouhani.ir/about.php?about_id=2).
6. This means his entire clerical education lasted no more than nine years, not enough time for him to complete what is known as *kharej*, which would qualify him as a *mujtahid* (Muslim jurist) or an ayatollah authorized to issue fatwas. His claim on his website (see <http://www.rouhani.ir/zendeginame.php>) that he is a *mujtahid* thus cannot be valid—nor, for the record, was Rouhani recognized as a *mujtahid* prior to the revolution. Ayatollah Khamenei’s own lack of credentials as a *mujtahid* when he succeeded Khomeini as Supreme Leader emboldened many Iranian clerics and officials to claim the title in order to assume high positions such as membership in the Assembly of Experts. In the Islamic Republic, the title *mujtahid* has come to reflect a cleric’s political status rather than his true educational qualification.
7. The mandatory military service for nonclerics lasted two years, usually following university studies. Rouhani discusses this issue in two separate places in his memoir, *Khaterat-e Dr. Hassan Rouhani, Enqelab-e Eslami (1341–1357)* (Tehran: Majma Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam, 1390 [2011]). On p. 353, he writes that after obtaining his undergraduate degree in 1972, “I had to go for military service” (Ibid. p. 353). He does not add the only obvious explanation: that serving in the military would allow him to practice as a lawyer. On p. 368, he writes, “I did not have any specific plan for after I finished university, and I was more thinking of working as a religious preacher. Maybe I was thinking of teaching at the university too [though one cannot teach at the university with only an undergraduate degree]. On the other hand, some of my seminarian friends had been arrested and sent to military service. I thought I might be sent to military service in one

of the future arrests too. This is why I decided to do my military service partly during my study at the university [and party afterward].” His explanation of doing his military service only for fear of being arrested is hardly convincing.

8. Usually, clerics who attended university with the intention of practicing law avoided active engagement in political activity because they feared disbarment. This helps explain Rouhani’s cautious foray into politics and contact with dissidents. A related example is that of Mohammad Khamenei, an older brother of the Supreme Leader who left seminary and studied law at the University of Tehran. Although Mohammad was never arrested by the SAVAK, he too exaggerates his anti-shah activities in his memoir. See Javad Kamvar Bakhshayesh and Javad Oryani, eds., *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Khamenei* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1992), vol. 1. See my review on this book, “Yeki az Khamenei-ha,” BBC Persian, June 3, 2013, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/06/130603\\_112\\_mk\\_khamenei\\_mohammad\\_book\\_review.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/06/130603_112_mk_khamenei_mohammad_book_review.shtml). For an account of Rouhani’s life based mostly on his memoir, see Steven Ditto, *Reading Rouhani: The Promise and Peril of Iran’s New President*, Policy Focus 129 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute, 2013), [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus129\\_Ditto\\_5.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus129_Ditto_5.pdf).
9. In his memoir, as is usual for Islamic Republic officials, Rouhani exaggerates his anti-shah activities, with the goal of serving his present needs.
10. See Hassan Rouhani, *Khaterat-e Dr. Hassan Rouhani, Enqelab-e Eslami (1341–1357)* (Tehran: Majma Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam, 1390 [2011]), p. 370.
11. Iranian officials harbor unusual enthusiasm for university degrees. According to a SAVAK document shown in an official Rouhani campaign video, the future president was referred to as “Dr.” even before he held a master’s degree. A document published in Rouhani’s memoirs indicates he was called “Dr.” since the beginning of the Islamic Republic. And in the introduction to an interview with Rouhani, when he was running for a Majlis seat in Semnan, the *Jomhourī-e Eslami* newspaper, affiliated with Rouhani’s political party of the same name, erroneously noted that he had received his PhD in the sociology of law from the University of London. See Hassan Rouhani, *Khaterat-e Dr. Hassan Rouhani, Enqelab-e Eslami (1341–1357)* (Tehran: Majma Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam, 1390 [2011]), pp. 717, 718.

12. Hassan Rouhani, *Khaterat-e Dr. Hassan Rouhani, Enqelab-e Eslami (1341–1357)* (Tehran: Majma Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam, 1390 [2011]), p. 500.
13. See Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Bazsazi va Sazandegui: Karnameh va Khaterat Sal-e 1368* (1990) (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 1390 [2011]), pp. 262, 272, 355.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
15. See Khamenei's appointment letter: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=2221>.
16. See the appointment letter: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=9602>.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MEHDI KHALAJI is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. Prior to his work at the Institute, he was a political analyst on Iranian affairs for BBC Persian, and later became a broadcaster for the Prague-based Radio Farda, the Persian-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. A scholar of Islam, Khalaji trained in Shiite theology and jurisprudence for fourteen years in the seminaries of Qom; he later studied Shiite theology and exegesis in Paris at L'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. He is the author of *The New Order of the Clerical Establishment in Iran* (2010, in Farsi).

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However complicated the decisionmaking process may be in Iran, one critical factor endures: Khamenei's ability to tighten his reins on power if he feels such a step is necessary.... As long as Khamenei rules, the prospect of a dramatic change in Iran's foreign policy, and what the country defines as its national and regional interests, is difficult to imagine.



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