Who's in Charge in Iran?

by Patrick Clawson **(/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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Brief Analysis

Unusual public statements on nuclear issues and ceasefire terms may signal that the Islamic Republic's clerical establishment plans to play a more active political role post-Khamenei.

U.S. officials have been puzzling over who is making decisions in Tehran, and a November 12 statement **(https://en.isna.ir/news/1405082114715/Assembly-of-Experts-Calls-for-Review-of-Iran-s-Defense-Doctrine)** from the Assembly of Experts raises further questions about who is really in charge. Is the clerical establishment asserting a greater role?

Breaking the Silence

During the reign of the late Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, there was no doubt that he was Iran's top decisionmaker, even when he was careful to frame certain policies (e.g., accepting the 2015 nuclear deal) as being advocated by other officials despite his misgivings. Since his killing, his son and successor Mojtaba has yet to be seen or heard. In recent weeks, written statements attributed to the new Supreme Leader have become more frequent and substantial, and several senior officials claim to have held long meetings with him. Yet it remains entirely unclear how much authority he actually wields.

U.S. officials were therefore encouraged when the Iranian delegation sent to negotiate the June memorandum of understanding was headed by Speaker of Parliament Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, a former general whom many thought was the real center of power. But the MOU quickly fell apart, with various reports suggesting it was deliberately sabotaged by radical critics. Washington then began to wonder whether real power was in the hands of Mohsen Rezaei, the former head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and now chief of the Supreme National Security Council. Hence, when Vice President JD Vance sent a letter to Iran on October 25 proposing a new framework **(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/vance-considers-direct-talks-with-iran-hardliner-in-push-to-end-war-0c2e3ea4)** for negotiations, it was addressed to Rezaei.

Yet a November 12 statement issued by the Assembly of Experts raises the possibility that the country's clerical establishment intends to play a more active role in decisionmaking. According to Iranian news agencies, the statement included the following declaration: "The repeated threats by the hostile enemy, particularly those directed at the country's nuclear program, demonstrate that no hope should be placed in the relevant international bodies. Therefore, withdrawal from the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty], a revision of the country's defense doctrine, and the development of stronger deterrent capabilities have become a national demand."

An elected body of eighty-four clerics, the assembly is formally charged with choosing the next Supreme Leader during times of succession—though only two such moments have come up in five decades, and the assembly's actual role in the choice is debatable. As such, the body is mostly known for infrequent formal sessions and ritual expressions of support for the leadership. All of its members are elderly (the Iranian joke is that their average age is "dead"), and few are politically active, so there is little precedent for them to weigh in on public policy issues. Indeed, observers have long concluded that the Islamic Republic is not really a theocracy, since major decisions are made by revolutionary power centers—chiefly those tied to the IRGC—rather than clerics.

The assembly also stirred controversy on June 27, when more than sixty members published an **unusual statement (https://www.irna.ir/news/86194414/%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B6%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%AE%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%B0%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA)** on the MOU. Despite thanking the negotiators, the signatories **were quite critical (https://houseofsaud.com/iran-assembly-experts-strategic-mistake-hormuz/)** of the agreement with Washington and warned that violating Mojtaba's red lines was "not permissible under any circumstances." Specifically, they argued that the decision to reopen the Strait of Hormuz before a ceasefire was reached in Lebanon was a "strategic error," and that Tehran should refuse further negotiations on the nuclear program. Days later, the assembly's secretariat **criticized the signatories (https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-62/4279218-%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%B4-%D8%AF%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AE%DB%8C-%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%B0%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7)** for issuing a statement outside normal procedures, calling it "unprecedented." At the time, the episode was seen as an anomaly, but the November 12 statement suggests otherwise.

Alternatively, the assembly may be acting as a cutout for criticism by other hardline elements—though unlike parliament, the clerical body has not previously been used in this manner as a message-signaling device. If that is the case, then the assembly's recent behavior would be yet another indication that hardliners are gaining more influence throughout the regime.

No Religious Brake on Nuclear Activities

Notably, the substance of the November 12 statement drives a nail in the coffin of any lingering hope that religious objections might keep Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. As previous Washington Institute publications have detailed **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-flexible-fatwa-how-expediency-shapes-nuclear-decisionmaking)** , various clerical loopholes meant that such hopes were always in vain. For example: clerics frequently change their opinions about such rulings; clerics have been known to give binding oral instructions that contradict their written statements on controversial issues; and a cleric's rulings become religiously null and void as soon as that individual dies. Hence, even the late Supreme Leader's past fatwa banning nuclear weapons was no barrier to actually developing them.

Tellingly, more Iranian officials are now saying that the country will (or should) reexamine its supposedly peaceful nuclear program and consider building a bomb. It can be easy to dismiss such statements when they come from radical clerics and other firebrands, but some of the latest comments have been made by more sober and authoritative sources, including Rezaei.

Policy Implications

Given the current uncertainty about who the regime's key policymakers are, it would be a triumph of hope over experience to expect that any one individual has the authority to make commitments to which Tehran will stick. This is a sharp contrast to the prewar era, when decisions made by the Supreme Leader generally stuck. Hence, any new agreements should be based on clear understandings of the consequences Iran would face if it fails to fulfill obligations approved by its negotiators. Any U.S. concessions should also be tied to Iranian actions and be easily reversible if circumstances require.

Finally, no U.S. policy decision should be based on the hope that Iran will refrain from developing nuclear weapons. Each time Tehran has offered assurances about the peaceful nature of its program, they have ultimately rung hollow, and the situation is no different today. Only concrete, verifiable limitations on the regime's nuclear activities will achieve the paramount goal of the past six U.S. presidents: to prevent Iran from getting the bomb.

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