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# After the Ayatollahs: The Middle East Post-Khamenei

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Brief Analysis

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**Two leading experts on clerical succession in Iran and Iraq discuss how the passing of Ayatollah Sistani and Supreme Leader Khamenei would affect American interests across the Middle East.**



*On February 6, Ali Mamouri and Suzanne Maloney addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mamouri is the editor of Al-Monitor's Iraq Pulse Desk and a professor of political science at the University of Sydney. Maloney is deputy director of the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution and a former member of the State Department Policy Planning Staff. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## **ALI MAMOURI**

**T**he two main centers of Shiite authority -- Qom in Iran and Najaf in Iraq -- operate on two very different models. The Qom model is based on *velayat-e faqih*, the doctrine granting the Iranian Supreme Leader his authority, as established by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and perpetuated by his successor Ali Khamenei. Conversely, the Najaf model is the traditional form of Shiism led by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Despite the absence of open hostility between the two centers, tensions have been felt behind the scenes, raising questions about how the eventual death of the elderly Sistani will affect Iranian influence in Najaf.

Since 2003, Sistani has tried to create a more democratic system of politics in Iraq. Yet Khamenei has interfered in that system by garnering influence with Iraqi Shiite political parties and former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki -- an effort Sistani combatted by promoting current prime minister Haider al-Abadi, who came to power in 2014. Today, Abadi's alignment with Sistani and commitment to limiting Iranian influence are best evidenced by Baghdad's efforts to draw the militias known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) under its direct authority.

Sistani's 2014 fatwa encouraging Muslims to fight the Islamic State further highlighted his tensions with Khamenei. While many fighters came to Iraq in response to Sistani's call, Khamenei used his political and security representatives in the PMUs to draw these fighters into his own sphere of influence. And when Sistani took steps to ensure that some PMU factions remained under his influence (e.g., the Marjaiya, Atabat, and Ali al-Akbar factions), Tehran retaliated by cutting their military and financial support.

Unlike Khamenei, Sistani avoids sectarian rhetoric involving Salafis, Sunnis, or the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, instead discouraging citizens of Gulf and Arab states from supporting rebellion against their governments. Similarly, he has urged followers not to take up arms on hot-button Shiite issues such as supporting Bashar al-Assad in Syria or opposing the Sunni government in Shiite-majority Bahrain.

In the event of either Khamenei or Sistani's death, a power vacuum would open in which the other could expand his influence. Historically, the death of a great *marja*, or Shiite religious authority, is followed by a five-to-ten-year period during which candidates compete to establish a support base. Previous examples include the deaths of Abdul-Karim Haeri Yazdi, Hossein Boroujerdi, Mohsen al-Hakim, and Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei.

If Sistani dies first, Iraqis would likely demand a prominent new leader in Najaf, both to offer religious guidance and to play a role in domestic politics and governance. A number of candidates at Najaf seminary seem poised to try succeeding him, most notably Muhammad Baqir al-Irawani, Abdul Aala Sabzawari, and Mohammad Reza Sistani (his son). Khamenei would no doubt seek to expand his own influence in Najaf as well, but his power there would be limited by a number of factors. First, his paramount authority in Iran stems more from his political stature in Tehran than his religious stature in Qom. Second, he does not have many representatives who could wield influence

in Najaf. Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, a Najaf-born member of the Assembly of Experts, has only a small office and a few students there, while Kamal al-Haydari, a Qom-based scholar who studied in Najaf, belongs to a reformist school of Shiism unpopular among many Iraqis.

In contrast, Sistani has a strong network of over 600 representatives throughout Iraq who would serve as a bastion against Khamenei's influence. Active students in the Najaf seminary would also play a role in promoting their teachers to replace Sistani. Furthermore, Najaf has a variety of independent financial sources throughout the world, including in Britain, the United States, and Lebanon.

## SUZANNE MALONEY

Over the past forty years, different U.S. administrations have tried both persuasion and pressure to advance their Iran policies. The common thread in these efforts is that transforming the nature of the Iranian regime has remained at the forefront of U.S. interests.

The Obama administration relied on pressure at times, especially through economic sanctions, but engagement and outreach were its preferred route. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was not sold as a mechanism to promote change in Iran; the Obama White House and State Department routinely commented that the nuclear deal was not contingent on political change. Yet the administration also emphasized that other forces -- including greater access to the global economy and continued diplomatic engagement -- would encourage pragmatic strains within the Iranian government.

The Trump administration seems ready to take a diametrically opposite tack. In its view, accommodation has encouraged Iran's ambitions, and confrontation is needed to restrain them. The president's team will likely use the JCPOA as a strict policing mechanism to ensure Iran does not commit any violations. They might also take a harder line on Iranian involvement in Syria and Yemen. Although the administration will not explicitly violate the JCPOA, it will revert to the economic pressures of 2010-2013 and express more interest in activities that point toward Iranian regime change.

While President Trump's more confrontational approach may do little to mitigate Tehran's negative behavior, continuing the Obama approach -- based on Iran moderating by virtue of engagement -- would have been a recipe for outright failure. The regime's behavior is unlikely to change until the position of Supreme Leader changes, and even then there is no guarantee. Despite America's interest in how Iran's presidential, parliamentary, and Experts Assembly elections turn out, the true determinant of change in Tehran will be the succession process post-Khamenei.

In this regard, it is important to understand which players will influence the succession behind the scenes. In 1989, individuals such as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Khomeini's youngest son Ahmad drove the process, but it is less clear who will do so this time around. Washington sometimes describes Iran as a military dictatorship, but that exaggerates the role played by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The outcome of the succession is difficult to determine as well; it could be someone like Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi or judiciary chief Sadeq Larijani, or perhaps someone from Khamenei's patronage network such as Ebrahim Raisi, current head of the Astan-e Qods foundation in Mashhad.

As for what will happen inside Iran after Khamenei's death, no one is sure. While the regime will probably have preemptive measures in place to protect against any overwhelming social response, it is difficult to predict such things, especially given the unexpected response to the disputed 2009 presidential election.

Finally, Hassan Rouhani has a strong chance of winning another term in the next presidential election, scheduled for May. This is largely because he is committed to *velayat-e faqih* in a way that former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other second-generation revolutionaries are not.

This summary was prepared by Emily Burlinghaus. ❖



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