

## Understanding Iran's Assembly of Experts Vote

by [Patrick Schmidt \(/experts/patrick-schmidt\)](#)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

### The victors, winnowed from an especially large field, will serve until 2024 and therefore may play a role in choosing a new Supreme Leader.

On February 11, campaigning began for the February 26 elections for Iran's Assembly of Experts, held on the same day as the vote for parliament (Majlis). The assembly is charged with selecting the Supreme Leader in case the current leader dies or becomes incapacitated, although it is not clear how large a role the assembly would in practice play (see "[Choosing Iran's Next Supreme Leader.](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/choosing-irans-next-supreme-leader)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/choosing-irans-next-supreme-leader>) PolicyWatch 2553). Given Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's advancing age and uncertain health -- he turns seventy-seven this year -- many in Iran assume a new leader or leadership council will be selected during the assembly's next term. Indeed, the current race has attracted a record number of candidates and disqualifications by the Guardian Council. On February 10, the Ministry of Information released the final list of 161 candidates as approved by the Guardian Council.

## COLLEGE OF CLERICS

The Assembly of Experts consists of eighty-eight Islamic jurists elected to eight-year terms. Tehran is the largest of the Experts Assembly electoral districts -- which are based on province and demographics -- with sixteen seats; the provinces of Razavi Khorasan and Khuzestan are the two next largest districts, with six seats each. A 2009 law extended the current assembly, elected in 2006, by two years to combine the assembly and parliamentary elections, with the goal of increasing voter turnout and reducing administrative costs. This year, more than fifty members are running for reelection, with Iranian law requiring that candidates acquire relative majorities to win.

The assembly's board of directors is chaired by Mohammad Yazdi with Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi as first vice chair. Both are former judiciary chiefs. Separately, six commissions cover various internal matters, among them the "Commission on Researching Article 111 of the Constitution," which addresses procedures should the Supreme Leader become deficient in his qualifications or incapacitated. By law, the assembly is required to meet at least once a year for a two-day period. According to the assembly's website, the current group has met eighteen times, not counting the meetings of individual committees. At its last meeting, on September 1, 2015, sessions with the Supreme Leader as well as Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC Qods Force, were mentioned in the Iranian press. Other pictures show the following figures addressing the assembly: nuclear negotiator Abbas Araqchi, IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, senior diplomatic advisor to the Supreme Leader Ali Akbar Velayati, and Supreme National Security Council secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani.

## BECOMING A CANDIDATE

According to Section 2 of the "Executive Bylaws for the Election of the Assembly of Experts," candidates must meet the following conditions:

1. A reputation for religious belief, reliability, and moral behavior.
2. The ability to interpret Islamic law [*ijtehad*] to the extent that they can understand certain issues in Islamic jurisprudence [*fiqh*] and can determine whether the Supreme Leader meets the conditions of leadership.
3. A political and social understanding of and familiarity with the issues of the day.
4. Belief in the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
5. Absence of an antipolitical or antisocial background.

Subsequent clauses outline that:

1. The determining sources for a candidate's qualification are the (Islamic) jurists of the Guardian Council.
2. Individuals whose interpretations of Islam [*ijtehad*] have been explicitly or implicitly validated by the Supreme Leader need not have their knowledge confirmed by the Guardian Council jurists.
3. Residence, birth, or nativity in the electoral district is not a necessity for the voters or candidates.
4. If members of the Guardian Council become candidates for the Assembly of Experts, they cannot supervise the election or make decisions relating to the electoral district in which they are running.

5. In July 1991, the Assembly decided that candidates needed to undertake an examination to demonstrate their religious qualifications, with current and former members exempted. The exam is now administered by the Guardian Council.

Unlike in the Majlis, women and religious minorities, including non-Shiite Muslims, face de facto ineligibility to run for the assembly. Nine women applied for candidacy in the third assembly elections in 1998, and ten women applied in the fourth assembly elections in 2006. None received Guardian Council approval. The complete absence of religious minority candidates includes Sunnis, who make up fully 10 percent of Iran's population.

## CAMPAIGNING

According to Article 17 of the electoral laws, "Within one day of the arrival of the written opinion of the Guardian Council jurists in response to the appeals request by candidates, the Interior Ministry is obligated to inform the general public of the names of the candidates who have been confirmed in each province by way of Islamic Republic Radio and Television [Seda va Sima-ye Jomhuri-e Eslami] and widely published newspapers..." With the list of approved candidates having been announced February 10 by the Interior Ministry, the official campaign period for the Experts Assembly runs from February 11 until February 25 at 8 a.m., twenty-four hours before voting begins.

According to the electoral laws, "In order to ensure equal access to candidates for advertising opportunities [on state-controlled networks] and control over candidates' advertising, in every province there will be a 'Commission to Investigate Election Advertising' directed by the provincial governor... This commission will comprise the governor, the highest judiciary official, a representative of the Guardian Council, and a representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)." All campaign advertisement must be submitted to this commission prior to its airing. As this section states, all candidates are legally guaranteed equal access to IRIB for advertising.

## THE CURRENT RACE

Guardian Council spokesman Siamak Rahpeyk recognized 794 final candidates for the Assembly of Experts; by other counts, 801 applied. On December 31, the Experts Assembly and Guardian Council announced that the four-hour test would be held January 5 in Qom, specifying that no alternative test date would be offered. The Guardian Council invited 527 candidates to take the test, excluding the 152 who reportedly withdrew and 111 who were denied permission (for a total of 790). Of the sixteen women who registered, ten received invitations to take the test, of whom a majority are seminary professors. None ultimately received Guardian Council approval. According to former Guardian Council spokesman Nejatollah Ebrahimian, approximately four hundred of those invited took the test, with other sources citing 373 to 375 test takers.

On January 26, the Guardian Council announced that it had accepted 166 candidates and rejected 207. A ten-day review period began January 31 for reconsideration of candidates protesting their disqualification. While the Guardian Council spokesman stated that no disqualifications at this time were official, this did not stop official and state-run media networks from publishing lists of accepted and rejected candidates.

On February 10, the Guardian Council and Ministry of Interior published the official Assembly of Experts candidate list. While on January 26 Guardian Council spokesman Rahpeyk acknowledged the previous figure of 166 final candidates, he said eight additional candidates had been disqualified and three additional candidates accepted -- leading to the final tally of 161. Of the 222 candidates to protest their disqualification, he noted that 151 had failed the test, 38 had missed it, and 25 had been turned away for other reasons. Ten of those protesting are unaccounted for in this tally. Rahpeyk also specified that approved candidates could change their electoral district until February 15.

The following table is assembled from the Ministry of Information's official approved candidate list, state media, as well as the Experts Assembly's website.

[\(/uploads/Images/AssemblyExpertsCandidates.pdf\)](#)

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[\(/uploads/Images/AssemblyExpertsCandidates.pdf\)](#)

ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS CANDIDATES, FEBRUARY 2016				
Province	Seats	GC approved	Candidates*	Select incumbents
East Azerbaijan	5	6	31	Mohammad Taqi Pour Mohammadi Mohammad Vaezi Hashem Hashemzadeh Harisi
West Azerbaijan	3	3	21	Asghar Dirbaz Sayyed Ali Akbar Ghoreishi
Ardabil	2	2	6	Sayyed Hassan Ameli Kalkhoran

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Worth noting here are the following details:

- The following six districts have the name number of candidates as seats available: Hormozgan, Semnan, North Khorasan, Bushehr, West Azerbaijan, and Ardabil.
- The following nine districts have one more candidate than assembly seats: Lorestan, Golestan, Kohgiluyeh Boyer-Ahmad, Qazvin, Sistan and Baluchestan, Khuzestan, South Khorasan, Ilam, and East Azerbaijan.
- The following seven districts have two more candidates than seats: Yazd, Hamadan, Kermanshah, Kerman, Kurdistan, Qom, and Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari.
- A Qom-based candidate, Misam Dust-Mohammadi, is the youngest of the entire field, at age twenty-four. Most candidates are much, much older (the common joke in Iran is that the average age of the assembly members is "dead").

Although charged with the vetting process, five Islamic jurists and one lawyer from the Guardian Council registered for assembly candidacy in December and received approval: Sayyed Mohammad Reza Modarresi Yazdi, who is running for the first time in Tehran; Mohammad Momen, who currently represents Qom; Sayyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, who currently represents Razavi Khorosan; and Mohammad Yazdi and Ahmad Jannati, who currently represent Tehran. Guardian Council lawyer Mohsen Esmaili is also running from Tehran. Sadeq Larijani, the current judiciary chief and a former Guardian Council member, is running from Mazandaran for his third consecutive term. President Hassan Rouhani has been an assembly member since its third iteration and is running for reelection from Tehran province. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has been a member since being elected to its first iteration in 1982.

This Experts Assembly election saw far more applicants than any previous assembly elections. In 2006, then Guardian Council spokesman Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei stated that approximately 500 candidates had applied, 204 were invited to take the test, and 144 were approved. The Iran scholar Wilfried Buchta further provides the following data in his book *Who Rules Iran?* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-rules-iran-the-structure-of-power-in-the-islamic-republic>)

Election	Date	Applicants	Approved by
First	October 1982	168	146
Second	August 1990	184	106
Third	October 1998	396	146

Official results from 2006 showed that 60.8 percent of 46,549,042 eligible voters participated. At 47 percent, Tehran had the lowest participation rate of all provinces. The third Experts Assembly election, in 1998, featured a lower overall participation rate, with official results showing 46.3 percent of 38,570,597 eligible voters participating and Tehran again having the lowest rate (39.45%). The Guardian Council had eliminated 250 of 396 candidates in that election. The second assembly election, held in 1990, featured a much lower participation rate still, with 37.1 percent of 31,280,084 eligible voters taking part. Credible allegations have surfaced that authorities inflated participation rates in prior elections.

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