

# Who Will Lead Post-Khamenei Iran?

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji), [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**O**n February 13, Mehdi Khalaji, Karim Sadjadpour, and Dennis Ross addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the just-released Policy Focus [Supreme Succession: Who Will Lead Post-Khamenei Iran?](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=360)

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=360> Mr. Sadjadpour is an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Ambassador Ross rejoined the Institute as counselor in December 2011 after serving as special assistant to President Obama and special advisor to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## MEHDI KHALAJI

**A**lthough it is unknown whether Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, will pass from the scene in the near future, his advanced age and alleged health problems make it important for the United States and its allies to gain a more complete understanding of the Iranian succession process. Whatever the outcome of that process, Washington should expect a rather different form of leadership to emerge, with the Islamic Republic likely completing its transformation from a clerical to a highly militarized regime.

Khamenei has marginalized the first generation of the Islamic Republic, forcing out those who held senior positions under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's rule and surrounding himself with intelligence and military figures. He has further consolidated power by elevating a new generation of weak politicians that owe their credentials to him. The political elite will have an exceedingly difficult time reaching consensus on succession in this environment, as Khamenei has excluded them from the regime's decisionmaking and created mechanisms to weaken the democratic legitimacy and authority of the presidency. For similar reasons, the clerical establishment is unlikely to have much say in succession. Although the clergy is wealthy, it has become increasingly weak politically and is unable to

publicly criticize the government or express an opinion on any major issue.

If history is any indicator, the formal succession process laid out by the constitution may not hold. The transition from Khomeini to Khamenei two decades ago demonstrated the regime's willingness to change laws to suit its needs. In 1989, Khomeini appointed a council to revise the constitution but died before the process was complete. These changes -- which would have allowed a lower-ranked cleric like Khamenei to become Supreme Leader, among other things -- were never voted on before the transition, so the succession was technically illegal. Given the regime's past willingness to amend and violate the constitution, it may do so again when determining Khamenei's successor.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps will likely play a leading role in the succession process. Historically a purely military organization, it has now become a sophisticated political, economic, and cultural entity. Khamenei personally runs the armed forces and has allowed them to take over at least a third of Iran's economy. In other words, he has built his power upon the IRGC, and the leadership that succeeds him will likely reflect the militarized structure of the political system.

Although the IRGC is highly factionalized and lacks a unified ideology, it is overwhelmingly anticlerical. Therefore, the powers-that-be are unlikely to accept a powerful cleric as Khamenei's successor. Instead, the IRGC is bound to push for a Supreme Leader who is too weak to reject its authority, such as an older, respected, ailing ayatollah who lacks the years and energy needed to shape the Islamic Republic as he wishes.

## **KARIM SADJADPOUR**

In the wake of Khomeini's death in 1989, the custodianship of the Islamic Republic was left to two individuals: Khamenei and President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who represented two differing schools of thought. The first, championed by Rafsanjani, favored reform, an open economy, and expanded social freedoms. In short, it favored a model similar to China. The second school believed that compromising on the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideals would cause the entire system to collapse. This school, driven by self-preservation but cloaked in ideology, has clearly prevailed.

The Obama administration, much like the Clinton administration in the late 1990s, has attempted to engage Tehran only to be rebuffed by Khamenei. Some officials still express hope of engaging the IRGC, whose major business interests are being increasingly frustrated by international sanctions. Yet Washington will probably not be able to sidestep Khamenei completely, since any IRGC leaders it might deal with will likely have been handpicked by the Supreme Leader. The more moderate elements are not the ones being promoted to higher ranks. Additionally, Khamenei has effectively cultivated loyalty among the IRGC, making it unlikely that they will turn on him in the near future.

In the face of unprecedented U.S. and international pressure, Khamenei is now being forced to make a transformative decision, something he has largely avoided throughout his rule. Namely, he must choose between compromise with the United States or continued efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. He must therefore calculate whether the cost of giving up the nuclear program is greater than the escalating outside pressure. Given Khamenei's drive for self- and regime preservation, his most likely decision is still unclear.

Whatever the case, Washington should not jump at any symbolic compromises he offers, since it is against his instincts to concede anything of real value, particularly since the domestic unrest of 2009. Instead, the United States would be wise to ensure that he still has a legitimate way out of the ongoing nuclear impasse. If he believes there is no open door, he is more likely to proceed with a military option.

## **DENNIS ROSS, MODERATOR Q&A**

**K**hamenei's willingness to make a deal with the United States on the nuclear issue remains unclear. He has

expressed fears that any concession will lead to the demise of the Islamic Republic. Given a reality in which not conceding will lead to tangible consequences -- namely, further isolation and economic pressures, which could also bring down the regime -- how will he choose to act? His answer to this question will determine whether a diplomatic outcome is possible. Moreover, the IRGC could pressure him into conceding sooner rather than later if they believe a confrontation is not in their best interests.

The essence of the Obama administration's approach has always been a genuine effort to engage the regime in authoritative dialogue rather than attempting to engage a single faction. Once it became clear that such dialogue was not possible, the administration focused on applying greater pressure while leaving the regime a way out. Currently, some evidence points to a potential diplomatic solution: Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi has declared that Iran is prepared to open talks with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany.

In short, despite recent talk that a military strike is now the only option, clear opportunities for diplomacy remain. Israel has long been one of the main proponents for crippling sanctions and international pressure -- measures that are now being adopted. Logically, then, it will allow more time for these measures, which are truly unprecedented, to work.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cory Felder. ❖*

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