



Iran's 2021 Presidential Vote and the Tightening of Regime Control

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A portrait of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei hovers behind President Hassan Rouhani, whose term concludes next year. Photo: REUTERS

On June 18, 2021, Iran will hold its thirteenth presidential election since the formation of the Islamic Republic. This follows a precedent of conducting regular national votes for the presidency, Majlis (parliament), Assembly of Experts, and, since 1999, municipal leadership. The democratic exercise has proceeded despite remarkable progress by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in establishing full-scale Islamic totalitarianism, personalization of power, and a hardening of the security state, while seeking to cripple civil society. The main purpose in maintaining an electoral process at all might be as a release valve for public discontent, at least for short periods, offering the fleeting prospect of change.

Observers both within Iran and abroad have an extraordinarily poor track record of predicting who might succeed an Iranian president once he has reached the end of his two-term limit. Each of the three last such outcomes—Mohammad Khatami’s victory in 1997, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s in 2005, and Hassan Rouhani’s in 2013—has been a surprise. This suggests the 2021 result will be no different. But even as analysts will inevitably struggle to divine a result, several months in advance, they can profitably examine the context in which an election will play out. Assessing likely eventualities requires looking at the role of elections, Khamenei’s various political interventions, who may come next, and what all this means for the United States.

This paper consists of four sections, followed by a set of policy recommendations. The first section examines the latest developments in the government’s electoral behavior and recent efforts to reform the election law. The second section addresses Khamenei’s achievements in weakening political leaders and democratic institutions. In this section, readers will find a brief account of one of Khamenei’s most ambitious recent projects—seeking to amend the constitution and change Iran’s system of government from a presidential to a parliamentary model. The study will explain how and why this initiative failed in its early stages, and also how the Supreme Leader creatively found ways to remedy that failure. In the third section, the paper points to evidence indicating that Khamenei wants to welcome a new generation of politicians to power. The fourth section, finally, elaborates on Khamenei’s utopian model and his self-perceived nearness to perfecting it.

The Role of Elections in an Islamic Authoritarian System

While elected institutions in Iran—especially the Majlis and the presidency—have become increasingly

irrelevant, elections still play an important role in the country’s political system. They allow for the promise of change, amid depleted hopes for reform or revolution, in a national climate where costs have grown for not only political activity but also civil and social activity such as NGO efforts. The 2020 Majlis elections had some important lessons for Iranian leaders, and these have influenced the vigorous debate about changing the election law.

Lessons from the 2020 Majlis Class

Iran’s parliamentary vote in February 2020 saw record low turnout since the formation of the Islamic Republic some four decades earlier. National participation was reported at 41 percent, with Tehran registering under 22 percent. Such figures marked a 10 percent dip from the previous vote four years earlier. Whereas typically the regime likes to announce a figure exceeding 50 percent to validate the Islamic Republic as a political system, the failure to produce such a figure this time suggested the regime was comfortable jettisoning its “populist obsession.”

Led by former Tehran mayor Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf—a former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force commander who is not affiliated with any political party—the newly formed Majlis has adopted a hostile attitude toward Rouhani, who faces twin crises in the Covid-19 pandemic and the fallout from the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” policy as he enters his last year in office.¹ As for the composition of the new Majlis, some 75 percent of its members now consist of hardliners, known as “principalists,” with the rest either of unknown affiliation or close to Rouhani. The decisive winner as a bloc was the Front of Stability of the Islamic Revolution (*Jebheh-ye Paydari Enghelab-e Eslami*), now holding 93 of the body’s 290 seats. Formed in 2012, this faction was close to Ahmadinejad, but after Khamenei broke with the former president late in his term, members moved toward the Supreme Leader. One further distinctive feature of the eleventh Majlis is the high IRGC

representation, numbering thirty members, twice that of the previous Majlis. All three Qom representatives are from the Guard. Moreover, except for certain expatriates, no Iranian political faction boycotted this vote.

The president can rely on neither the Supreme Leader's support nor on friendly public opinion, which has collapsed. This is an unhappy position that causes him humiliation at home while tarnishing his brand as an effective head diplomat abroad. The meeting held between Iraqi prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and Ayatollah Khamenei on August 21, 2020, indicates that on the most important world and regional issues, Rouhani and his team have been sidelined. In the case of Syria specifically, when President Bashar al-Assad visited Iran in late February 2019, he did not meet separately with Rouhani or his foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif.²

In seeking to undermine Rouhani, members of the current Majlis have likened him to Iran's first president, Abolhassan Banisadr, who was violently and illegally removed from power and fled the country with his life. According to Kashmar parliamentarian Javad Nikbin, as quoted on the Majlis website, "We want to dismiss Rouhani like Banisadr."³ Furthermore, a full two hundred Majlis members, with Qalibaf pulling the strings, have signed a request seeking Rouhani for questioning; their draft proposal calls for the president's ouster owing to his ineffectiveness.⁴ Some hardliners have even argued that Rouhani and Zarif should be tried for "treason."⁵

In July 2020, however, these agitations appeared to calm magically overnight after Khamenei met virtually with members of parliament. As Khamenei put it, "Fortunately, the new Majlis is among the strongest and most revolutionary in the [Islamic Republic] period."⁶ During his talk, he followed his habit of imparting several bits of long-worn ideological doctrine to the legislators. After defining the ideal relationship between the Majlis and the executive branch, Khamenei explicitly pushed back against the parliament's plan to bring Rouhani in

for questioning or to end his term prematurely: "First," he instructed, "all governments are obligated to work until the last day, the last moment. Then, they are charged to transfer the *amanat* ("custody," or job) to the next government...Both the Majlis and government should manage the environment in a way that does no significant harm to the affairs of the country."⁷

Khamenei's admonition matched his behavior at the close of both the Khatami and Ahmadinejad administrations, when legislators similarly called for the leaders to step down early. More practically, the typically despotic intervention in Majlis affairs by Khamenei had two aims:

- **To make crystal clear that neither the president nor the Majlis has full autonomy or authority.** According to this logic, the Supreme Leader can veto a two-thirds decision by the Majlis if he wishes. He can also choose to remove his protection of the president at any moment, thereby depriving him of his power.
- **To weaken legislative factions by pitting them against each other.** For a Supreme Leader like Khamenei, who lacked political or religious legitimacy when appointed (he was neither an ayatollah nor a *mujtahid*, violating the constitution), this is the only way to consolidate power and stay immune from an effective counterattack.

These points show why Khamenei prefers a weakened president to one successfully preyed upon by his adversaries. The latter case, in the Supreme Leader's view, could lead to two undesirable outcomes: (1) dangerous overconfidence for the Majlis; and (2) a victimized president who draws sympathy and restored support from his social base.

Despite the embarrassingly low voter turnout in the Majlis vote, Khamenei appears extraordinarily pleased with his ability to guide the recent electoral process, while tightening his circle of elites amid crises ranging from widespread domestic protests to the pandemic.

Reforming the Election Law

Iran's election law is designed explicitly to guarantee the Supreme Leader's ability to secure a desired outcome, with all its consequences. In other words, the lack of freedom or fairness in Iran's electoral system is a structural feature, not an accident. The constitution, moreover, enshrines the Supreme Leader's exclusive right to outline the nation's foreign and domestic policies. In a document titled "The Election's General Policies," dated October 13, 2016, Khamenei explained his principles for ensuring strict electoral compliance with Islamic Republic precepts:

9. Meticulous definition of criteria, qualifications, general and particular conditions of [acceptable] candidates within the constitutional framework, with an emphasis on intellectual and physical capacity, competence for relevant responsibilities, and commitment to Islam, revolution, Islamic government, and the constitution, especially devotion to *velayat-e faqih* [rule of the jurispudent] as well as economic and moral cleanliness...

10.5. Definition and declaration of criteria for identifying the political and religious status of presidential candidates and their managerial competence by the Guardian Council...

13. Creation of mechanisms for the efficient performance of parliamentarians, compliance with their oath, prevention from moral, economic, and financial exploitation, and measures in case they lose Majlis qualifications or [the Guardian Council] finds a legislator to lack them.⁸

Such verbiage notwithstanding, Islamic Republic elites have criticized the existing election law for two main reasons:

- **The claim by conservatives that it fails to block opposing factions from entering the race.** Moderates hold a countervailing view: that the law's rules and regulations allow easy justification to deny their candidacy.

- **Administrative confusion.** In one such instance, Article 115 of the constitution reads, "The president must be among the country's political and religious men and have the following qualifications: being originally Iranian, Iranian citizenship, management skill, a good reputation, trustworthiness, piety, religious belief, belief in the foundations of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in the country's official religion." Setting aside gender, many of these qualifications, such as those for genealogy and citizenship, are difficult to measure. In a clause that applies to other Iranian elections, but not the presidential one, candidates are required "to express loyalty to the constitution and the progressive principle of the absolute authority of *faqih* [*velayat-e faqih*]." This provision has allowed for the legal disqualification of most moderates, along with individuals failing to prove their devotion to the Supreme Leader. Consequently, in each election, hundreds of ordinary citizens, from university students to rural farmers, have registered as candidates only to be rejected by the Guardian Council, which views this process as a major headache and cause for delays.⁹

Calls to reform the election law date to the Khatami period, when in 2002 reformists won the Majlis election and the reformist president still appeared to hold meaningful power. Khatami thus sent "twin bills" to the Majlis, aimed at increasing the president's authority on one hand and reforming the election law on the other. Both measures were designed to bolster democratic institutions at the expense of the unelected Supreme Leader's absolute authority. For its part, the second bill was written to limit the supervisory power of the Guardian Council over elections. The hardline *Kayhan* newspaper called the twin bills "an excuse for regime change."¹⁰ Predictably, the Guardian Council rejected both bills after their adoption by the Majlis, despite Khatami's threat to resign if the council took such a step. Dozens of reformists gathered in protest in the Majlis building, relenting only after they received an angry private message from Khamenei. In the end, Khatami stepped back from his resignation threat, marking a decisive

turning point in the decline of Iran's reform movement.

The voting reform issue sat idle during Ahmadinejad's tenure, and Rouhani focused on the nuclear file when he became president in 2013. The signing two years later of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the Iran nuclear deal is known, appears to have given Rouhani a surfeit of confidence. In public addresses, he began expressing his desire to increase presidential authority and reform the election law. But this bid was effectively halted by the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, a diplomatic blow that eroded Rouhani's base at home and emboldened conservatives, aided by state media, to intensify their rhetorical campaign against him. On the second item, the election law, Rouhani pushed ahead as a means of investing in his political camp's future, sending a bill to the Majlis in 2019.

Both Rouhani and his opponents wanted the election reform to succeed, but for the opposite reasons outlined earlier. As a result, disagreements among the government, Majlis, and Guardian Council ultimately scuttled the initial attempt to produce a bill. The incoming Majlis, a far more hardline body than its predecessor, seized the initiative by reintroducing legislation, with the specific goal of preventing a Rouhani ally from running for president in 2021. In September 2020, former reformist parliament member Mohsen Rohami reflected on the situation:

MPs, instead of paying attention to the national interest and providing employment for people, are after their factional interests, trying to impede the presence of reformists in the future government. For example, they reform the presidential election law and add a seventy-year-old age condition to it in order to prevent some individuals, like Mohammad Reza Khatami [the former president's brother and the general secretary of the country's largest reformist bloc, the Islamic Participation Party, which was banned after the 2009 political crisis], from running in the 2021 election.¹¹

Khamenei's Meddling with Political Leaders

Khamenei has increasingly sought to weaken Iran's elected political leaders, including by stoking rivalries and undermining figures who appeared to be rising to prominence. And he has openly talked about changing the constitution to dilute the presidency by restoring the position of a prime minister.

Encouraging Divisions Within the Political Elite

In the three decades after Khamenei assumed office as Supreme Leader, the moderate/reformist versus conservative/hardliner dichotomy helped characterize Iran's political scene. Most analysts emphasized the "dual sovereignty" of the Iranian political system inherent in its constitution. But cracks began to appear in this construct as early as 2009, given the disarray and violence that followed that year's presidential election. It was, however, President Rouhani's failure to fulfill his various promises—including on nuclear diplomacy and rescuing the moribund national economy—that extinguished the last embers of hope surrounding the country's traditional political factions and patterns. On this topic, the Iranian political order was typically regarded as one of electoral or hybrid authoritarianism, allowing democratic competition among the country's political elites. In such a system, many hoped, moderate factions could use election victories to slowly facilitate a transition to democracy and thereby normalize relations with the West. With Rouhani, however, observers both inside and outside Iran ultimately lamented a failure to carry out such a broader political transformation, as well as the president's shortcomings in both domestic and foreign policy. They likewise began to see him as irrevocably yoked to the Supreme Leader and his views.

Khamenei, for his part, has transformed the Islamic Republic into personality-centered

order—notwithstanding his lack of personal charisma—that denies autonomy or freedom of action to conventional authorities and democratic institutions. In carrying out this transformation, he has cleverly appropriated mechanisms used in other totalitarian systems and starved the executive branch of power except where it serves his own agenda.¹² Furthermore, by seeding multiple redundant institutions with parallel functions, he has subverted greater institutional strength in Iran, instead encouraging antagonism and rivalry.¹³ This approach further exacerbates a national crisis of trust and authority, leaving political actors and the public feeling perplexed and powerless.

If past is prologue, no former president should expect to sleep well after his tenure. All three of Iran's most recent presidents have experienced an unenviable course. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (r. 1989–97) was internationally recognized for his political-economic apparatus and his kingmaking role in Khamenei's election as the second Supreme Leader. But after spending two bitter decades on the margins following his presidency, he died mysteriously at age eighty-two in a pool, under surveillance and burdened by political pressures.¹⁴ Mohammad Khatami (r. 1997–2005), the most popular president in Islamic Republic history, represented the dreams and demands of the urban middle class and modernized social strata. But since 2009, he has been banned from any public or media activity. Finally, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (r. 2005–13), once seen as Khamenei's favorite president and still submissive to his will, is himself disallowed from public activities or media appearances.

Rouhani appears to be facing a similar fate, with one cautionary example being that of his younger brother Hossein Fereydoun, who has been imprisoned since October 2019. Fereydoun served as the president's special aide, advisor to Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, and a member of the nuclear negotiation team. He also served as Iran's ambassador to several countries prior to his brother's presidency. His woes began in 2017, when he was indicted on financial corruption charges, including receipt of bribes. He lost his case in 2019, and was sentenced to seven

years in prison and forced to return 31 billion tomans (about US\$700,000 as of autumn 2020) to the government. Before being admitted to Tehran's Evin Prison, Fereydoun told journalists that the charges were based on wiretapping of the president's office, which is “against the law, religion, and ethics, and it should be addressed by government and the judiciary.”¹⁵

Khamenei has not limited his defamation efforts to presidents and their associates. In February 2013, for example, he sought discredit to members of the well-known Larijani political family, who had established a formidable political network in the country. Specifically, he allowed then president Ahmadinejad to air a video clip during a Majlis session showing two of the brothers, Ali and Fazel, apparently engaging in an illegal deal.

A different episode saw the Supreme Leader try to indirectly embarrass Sadegh Larijani, yet another of the brothers. Previously, the two were reported to be quite close, with Khamenei frequently praising Sadegh's character. Sadegh also carried a reputation for ceaseless commentary on domestic and foreign policy issues alike, while leveling some of his harshest critiques at former president Rafsanjani and current president Rouhani.

Sadegh served as Khamenei's appointed judiciary chief for a decade, and given his intimate relationship with the IRGC and the country's security apparatus, his name was often floated as a successor to the Supreme Leader. At the end of 2018, following the death of Rafsanjani, who then headed the country's Expediency Council, Khamenei named Sadegh as the new council head.

Succeeding Larijani as judiciary chief was Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi, who a week after assuming office dismissed Akbar Tabari, Larijani's deputy and closest confidant. Several Majlis members followed this action by charging Tabari with running a corruption scheme within the ministry.¹⁶ With Raisi's blessing, Tabari was arrested in 2019 by IRGC intelligence, and he is currently awaiting his sentence.

As for Sadegh himself, he has been accused of

receiving illegal funds to develop a highly luxurious seminary in Qom.¹⁷ This serious charge, given his status atop the Expediency Council, prompted him to go silent. It also weakened the authority of the council, revealing its superficial character as an intermediary body and its subjugation to Khamenei. These developments effectively quelled Sadeqh's dream of succeeding the Supreme Leader, as well as Ali's aspirations for the presidency, even as both continue to serve Khamenei's interests in the government.

Khamenei is troubled not only by current office-holders. After all, he can facilitate their dismissal and neutralize their influence after their terms end. He worries, in addition, about absolutely anyone who might enjoy a considerable social base and who historically has shown competence in political mobilization. His goal is to deprive any such independent authorities, whether religious, political, social, or cultural, of their ability to sustain influence over any period. This justifies, in the Supreme Leader's view, all aggressive means to soil their decent image and rights as citizens. Ultimately, Khamenei seeks to convince everyone in his orbit that power issues from his will alone.

Distorting the Constitution as a Way of Ruling

In September 2011, with the regime not yet recovered from the 2009 Green Movement shock, President Ahmadinejad started seriously defying the Supreme Leader's authority by asserting his "democratic" power. This contest had begun at the start of Ahmadinejad's second term, when he sought control in choosing his cabinet members and deputies. The power struggle that ensued saw Khamenei ultimately triumph, as he inevitably does.

The struggle also birthed Khamenei's flirtation with getting rid of the Iranian presidency altogether. In a speech in western Iran in October 2011, laying the ground for such a potential change, Khamenei praised the "flexibility" of the country's prevailing system:

Recall once there was in the constitution [the position] of prime minister and president [wherein the president held an almost ceremonial role and most executive power was in the prime minister's hands]. Then, experience taught us that this was not appropriate. Imam [Ruhollah Khomeini, the founding leader of the Islamic Republic] ordered a group of the nation's elite, from among academics, clergy, and [the Majlis], to sit and change the constitution according to what was needed. They did it. In the future too, these things are changeable. Today's system is presidential; that said, people elect the president by their direct vote. So far, it was [a] good and [successfully] tested [model]. If at some moment in the future, near or far—and probably such things will not happen in the near future—we feel that the parliamentary system works better than the presidential one, as it does in some of the world's countries, there would be no problem; the Islamic Republic of Iran can change [one system] to another. It does not matter.¹⁸

By abolishing the troublesome institution of the presidency, Khamenei's thinking likely went, the regime could alleviate various uncertainties associated with the national election process and its outcomes. A prime minister, in this structure, would head the executive branch, assume office based on a Majlis confidence vote, and remain accountable to the legislature for his entire term. Such a system would facilitate the Supreme Leader's tightened control over the executive branch. In a number of ways, moreover, controlling Majlis elections could be easier than controlling presidential elections. Specifically, various forms of voter manipulation at the local level, where the electorate often acts based on apolitical (and largely economic) motivations, draw less attention and backlash than they would in a polarized national race.

Eliminating the presidency could also give Khamenei greater peace of mind about the succession process. According to Iran's constitution, if the Assembly of Experts fails to appoint a successor for the deceased or dismissed Supreme Leader, a provisional leadership council will be formed and undertake the

leader's responsibilities until the assembly can agree on an appointee. The provisional council consists of the president, judiciary chief, and an ayatollah member of the Guardian Council selected by the Expediency Council. Since the Assembly of Experts has no deadline for naming a successor, this provisional period can continue for a considerable period. Further, the only elected official in this trio would be the president, with the Guardian Council member and judiciary chief both being Supreme Leader appointees. Removing the president would therefore lift virtually all constraints on Khamenei to determine his successor.

After Khamenei issued his October 2011 statement on the matter, then Majlis speaker Ali Larijani indicated the Supreme Leader had issued an order for "the reform of the state's structure,"¹⁹ with a purported four-month deadline. This dictum stirred up much debate and discussion among Iranian officials, but ultimately Khamenei seems to have dropped it, in part at the personal urging of Rafsanjani. In his Nowruz interview with the *Aseman* weekly, shortly after Khamenei's remarks, Rafsanjani explained, "Knowing that [Khamenei] was not in agreement with [the idea of amending the constitution], I declared my objection." He sought then to reframe the narrative, explaining that "the Supreme Leader has made a statement in Kermanshah which became the subject of misinterpretation. He had a different intention. He meant to say that there is no impasse in our government."

Rafsanjani thus recounted his meeting with Khamenei, which likely was redacted at the Supreme Leader's discretion:

When [Khamenei] returned from Kermanshah... I asked him what he meant by [his statement that we are not facing an impasse]...I told him, "A member of the Majlis board of directors told me that it has been a year since you formed a committee [for this purpose]." Khamenei answered, "This is not true, and I didn't do it." Then Khamenei ordered the rumor to be [publicly] denied.²⁰

Rafsanjani finally revisited Khamenei's previous opposition to a change to a parliamentary system: "I remember the time when Khamenei was expressing the firmest objections against [such a system], saying that we promised people the republic and the people's slogan was 'Independence, freedom, Islamic republic.'"²¹

Rafsanjani's words should be read carefully and critically. He was well-known for his political canniness and attentiveness to crafting historical narratives. Even if what he recounted is true, he undoubtedly decontextualized facts. First, it is an open secret that Khamenei was unhappy while serving as president (1981–89), in constant tension with the prime minister, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the later leader of the Green Movement who then enjoyed the full support of Ayatollah Khomeini. Khamenei's displeasure, for its part, was rooted in what he perceived as his inadequate constitutional authority, as compared with the prime minister's. Once he became Supreme Leader, though, Khamenei's attraction to a parliamentary system was easy enough to explain: he had acquired the authority to control the prime minister. Indeed, when he assumed his new position in 1989, he and Rafsanjani devised a plan to share power without delegating it to other players. Under their arrangement, a Supreme Leader Khamenei would supervise a range of entities, from the media to the armed forces, and a President Rafsanjani would run the economy, while the position of prime minister would be eliminated.

Today, the situation has changed dramatically. Khamenei and Rafsanjani managed to marginalize their opponents, but only for the Supreme Leader to ultimately nudge Rafsanjani out of his circle, ending their partnership. The decisive instance in this breakup was Khamenei's manipulation of the 2005 presidential election in Ahmadinejad's favor, when Rafsanjani had been seeking to reassume his old post, succeeding Khatami. Khamenei was then at the apex of his power, and Rafsanjani felt cheated. Even Rafsanjani's open letter to Khamenei, complaining to "God" about the election, drew no response. As for the God reference, Rafsanjani appeared to have realized

the immutability of Khamenei's power, thus explaining his appeal to a higher power. The other candidate, Mehdi Karrubi, wrote a more candid open letter to the Supreme Leader, in which he mentioned the role of Mojtaba, Khamenei's son, in manipulating the results along with IRGC. A page had been turned.

This radical initiative to change the system of government, however, would have opened a Pandora's box, in large part because a constitutional revision would have raised the related question of whether the "absolute authority of the ruling jurist" should

itself be amended. Such a development could have emboldened civil society, political actors, and even Khamenei's hidden or marginalized rivals to elevate abolition of *velayat-e faqih* into a national demand. The regime has been especially sensitive to such challenges since the Green Movement, with fears reinforced by widespread demonstrations in 2017–18 and 2019. A referendum on the constitutional amendment, as the regime ultimately concluded, could easily become a referendum on the legitimacy or existence of the Islamic Republic itself, making the move appear almost suicidal.

ARTICLE 177 OF IRAN'S CONSTITUTION

The revision of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, whenever needed by the circumstances, will be done in the following manner:*

The Leader issues an edict to the President after consultation with the Nation's Expediency Council stipulating the amendments or additions to be made by the Council for Revision of the Constitution, which consists of:

1. Members of the Guardian Council
2. Heads of the three branches of the government
3. Permanent members of the Nation's Expediency Council
4. Five members from among the Assembly of Experts
5. Ten representatives selected by the Leader
6. Three representatives from the Council of Ministers
7. Three representatives from the judiciary branch
8. Ten representatives from among the members of the Islamic Consultative Assembly
9. Three representatives from among the university professors

The method of working, manner of selection and the terms and conditions of the Council shall be determined by law.

The decisions of the Council, after the confirmation and signatures of the Leader, shall be valid if approved by an absolute majority vote in a national referendum.

The contents of the Articles of the Constitution related to the Islamic character of the political system; the basis of all the rules and regulations according to Islamic criteria; the religious footing; the objectives of the Islamic Republic of Iran; the republic[an] character of the government; the *wilayat al-amr*; the Imamate of Umma; and the administration of the affairs of the country based on national referenda, official religion of Iran [Islam] and the school [Twelver Jafari] are unalterable.

*See full (Persian) text on the Majlis website, https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/content/iran_constitution.

The process outlined in Article 177 requires common ground among the president, judiciary chief, and Majlis speaker, but that common ground is absent by design. Indeed, the Supreme Leader has encouraged factional difference among the three branches expressly so that they cannot band together to potentially threaten his hegemony. Alongside the national referendum and associated public debate required to change the constitution, dissidents could take advantage of the situation, organizing anti-government demonstrations and other challenges to authority.

Khamenei's remark in Kermanshah, finally, issued from a confluence of dynamics, one being his overconfidence after the quick suppression of the Green Movement. The action required limited violence and resulted in house arrest for the movement's leaders, without drawing much backlash from its dispirited followers. Another involved his frustration with President Ahmadinejad over his perceived megalomania and aspirations for wider power. Elements of the IRGC, meanwhile, had persuaded the Supreme Leader that the measure might be pushed through to the detriment of only the president, while sparing Khamenei himself.

In the end, evidently heeding Rafsanjani's warnings, the Supreme Leader decided on a middle ground: instead of amending the constitution's text, he sought to maintain the country's democratic facade while significantly decreasing the political costs of his authoritarian rule. He did so by dramatically expanding the authority of the Guardian Council, empowering it to exert stringent control over both the electoral process and elected officials, including by blocking Majlis candidates perceived as undesirable. Khamenei also enshrined the council as the unique and ultimate authority on interpreting the constitution, systematically swapping democratic principles for pan-Islamic ones. Khamenei furthermore allowed the Majlis to apply excessive pressure on the president and his ministers, leading to the dismissal of many. Finally, the Supreme Leader quietly began nuclear talks in 2012 in Oman without Ahmadinejad, a deeply wounding move given the president's view of the nuclear file as an unparalleled

opportunity to boost his popularity.

This sophisticated attempt to deplete the democratic character of the national document assuaged the leadership on various fronts, including in dealing with opposition movements, perceived subversion, and associated factional struggles within the military and political elite. Such a move was also seen as providing a life insurance policy for the "soft totalitarianism" that might prevail in the post-Khamenei era.

On May 27, 2019, 150 members of the Majlis sent Khamenei a letter requesting that he use the powers vested in him by Article 177 to change Iran's government from a presidential to a parliamentary system, forming one "Great" Majlis. But the Supreme Leader responded that this was "out of the question."²² That same month, addressing students at the Imam Khomeini Husseiniyah in Tehran, Khamenei discoursed as follows:

The structure of our constitution is good—that said, it is flawless...Regarding the parliamentary system that one of our friends [a student in attendance] mentioned, we have discussed the matter in the assembly for amending the constitution [in 1989] and reached the conclusion that we find ourselves in today. The problems of the parliamentary system are greater than in the presidential one, at least for us. Anyhow, I do not see any problem in the structure. Yes, we doubtless have problems with government officials. They have shortcomings, multiple tastes, incompetence, defects.²³

Who's Next?

As he has gotten older, Khamenei has focused more and more on passing the torch of the revolution to a new generation. He wants to see the regime run not by former revolutionaries but by those who, under his rule, rose to power in the security apparatus. One such figure, discussed in depth later, is Sayyed Samsam al-Din Ghavami.

Khamenei's Opportunistic Elevation of Youth

Especially since the presidential tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Khamenei has placed an almost obsessive emphasis on the “power of the young” and the need for a new generation of Iranian leadership. This drive has been rooted not in a sincere appreciation of youth but in a self-preserving urge to fend off his peers, such as Rafsanjani, Karrubi and Mousavi. These leaders have not especially looked up to him or admired his prestige, and their mutual trust has been shallow at best.

A parallel to Khamenei's current approach can be found in Joseph Stalin's totalitarian outlook in the 1930s, when he was at the height of his power and carried out his Great Purge. In explaining the causes and contexts of that event, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski wrote: “There were many in the party, especially Old Bolsheviks, who paid him due honor but were not bound to him by heart and soul. They had risen by their own efforts, not merely by his favor, and might therefore be a dangerous source of unrest or revolt in the time [*sic*] of crisis. Hence, as a potential opposition, they must be destroyed.”²⁴

Khamenei views much peril in his generational peers, such as Khatami, who are perceived as tending toward “deviation” and “revisionism” even as they appeal to the spirit of Islamic ideology and the 1979 revolution. Indeed, he views such actors as being no better than his outright political opponents or even foreign enemies of the regime. The stark finding here is that failure to obey the Supreme Leader unconditionally, even if one subscribes faithfully to revolutionary ideology, ranks with actually opposing the Leader, Islamic ideology, and *velayat-e faqih*. Resuming the Stalin comparison, one finds that

ideology had to be revised so as to make it clear to all that they were not entitled to appeal to it independently...they might always invoke yesterday's Stalin against today's and quote the leader's words against himself. The purge, therefore, was designed to destroy such ideological links as still

existed within the party, to convince its members that they had no ideology or loyalty except to the latest order from the high, and to reduce them, like the rest of society, to a powerless, disintegrated mass...wherever there was any ideological link other than loyalty to the ruler, there was a possibility of factionalism even if it did not actually exist.²⁵

As political historians have pointed out, revolutionary totalitarian rulers equate the presence of an alternative elite with the unsettling potential for democracy. Such rulers, according to one such historian, Aviezer Tucker, “established [themselves] as the only elite in society by eliminating all existing, potential, possible, imaginary, and phantasmal alternative elites. Without the elimination of alternative elites, there could not be total control of society by a single, hierarchically unified elite. Potential alternative elites included people who posed no immediate or even foreseeable threat to the totalitarian elite but could have become such a threat—‘objective enemies,’ in Marxist jargon.”²⁶

Khamenei has thus sought to marginalize his politically threatening peers, along with mobilizing youth. The youth track has two basic explanations:

- **A totalitarian system's reliance on mass movements.** Every totalitarian leader requires blind support from a segment of the population in order to retain power and legitimacy. This explains why mobilizing youth through the Basij network and other means is vital for the Iranian regime. Even though many Iranian youth are regarded as discontented and apolitical, at least some might be galvanized to support—and die for—the Supreme Leader, and to defeat a disorganized, largely inward-looking, and politically numbed majority whose members are not willing to die for their own cause.
- **Obsolescence of the first generation of the Islamic Republic.** For the Supreme Leader, the first generation of Islamic Republic leaders, such as Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel and the Larijani brothers, have ceased to be useful enablers.

They are likewise of compromised popularity in Iranian society and of questionable personal loyalty to the Supreme Leader, who makes a practice of not allowing any official to gain outside power by holding a sensitive position for too long. This also explains Khamenei's inclination to groom a younger generation that might sustain a revolutionary course after Khamenei's death.

In his May 2019 meeting with students, Khamenei did not mask his determination to promote the rise of a lesser-known future president, perhaps someone currently on the political margins.²⁷ He also bluntly expressed his preference for such a leader to be "*hezbollahi*," a reference to youth who embrace the regime's revolutionary spirit, resist temptation and reconciliation with liberal democracy and the West, and counter internal efforts toward reform. More abstractly, these security/military/judicial officials are seen as having the gift of intuiting the Supreme Leader's every unspoken wish and acting quickly to realize his will, while easily transgressing legal-bureaucratic barriers.²⁸ "Youth" for Khamenei, as suggested earlier, does not signal vitality or new thinking, but a class whose accidental rise leaves its members entirely indebted to the Supreme Leader and his supposed generosity and grace.

Khamenei's urgings on this count go beyond mere rhetoric. They are practically damaging to any well-known officials mulling whether they might succeed Rouhani. On a tactical level, the Supreme Leader apparently believes that the few months before the election will be ample time to enlist the state propaganda machine to boost his preferred candidate and introduce him to the world. He takes heart in his success in engineering a favorable result in the 2020 Majlis vote, given political paralysis across the spectrum and the vulnerability of all incumbents amid domestic and international criticism of Iran. And he feels validated by his effective endorsement of Ahmadinejad and even Rouhani, both of whom were little known by the public until a few months before their respective elections.

But among citizens of Iran, hopelessness has only worsened amid economic suffering exacerbated

by U.S. sanctions. The middle class has shrunk dramatically, an outcome about which academics have long warned.²⁹ Moreover, the widespread, surprisingly resilient 2019 protest movement, emerging from the Iranian mainstream, evinced strong opposition to the regime but also reflected deteriorating hope in the political system and any prospect for meaningful change.

A double shock to the Iranian system came in the U.S. targeted killing of IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani, followed shortly thereafter by Iran's accidental shoot-down of a Ukrainian airliner. The death of the supposedly invincible Soleimani, a national hero and protector against foes such as the Islamic State, punctured the regime's self-portrayal as a regional power. And the limited response drew murmurs that Iran was a mere paper tiger in its contest with the United States. Regarding the airliner tragedy, which killed some 150 Iranians along with almost thirty others, the Iranian people faulted the regime for failing to take responsibility or devote any meaningful attention to the mourners.³⁰

Additional failures have included the faltering of the JCPOA, with the Iranian nuclear program having once been a point of national pride. Meanwhile, the government's profound mishandling of the Covid crisis, and the clergy's particular role in spreading the virus, has inflamed public resentment. Public trust has been further eroded by the IRGC's increasing securitization of society, including the use of violence against protestors, along with soaring levels of corruption. The government, in addition, has targeted Persian media outside the country through disinformation campaigns, exposing consumers to the vortex of a "post-truth" era, and carried out cyberattacks and other forms of harassment on expatriates. All such developments have stoked public cynicism, potentially heralding greater social disintegration and even unrestrained uprising. Iran's totalitarians will no doubt thrive amid such an atomized, depoliticized society.

As for Khamenei's search for a presidential prospect, his focus on security-military circles does not rule out a clerical candidate, so long as he has

some security background. Nor does this mean the next president will by necessity be a former IRGC commander. Prospects with a dual military-clerical background might include Gholam Hossein Mohammadi Golpayegani (b. 1943), who runs the Supreme Leader's office, Asghar Mir Hejazi (b. ca. 1940s), another powerful figure in his office, or Ahmad Marvi (b. 1958), who currently serves as custodian of the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad and head of the Astan-e Qods Razavi foundation.

The initial decision to enlist Golpayegani occurred because Khamenei's sons were too young to assume the role, but Golpayegani—a lower-ranking cleric—also had a strong intelligence background that included cofounding Iran's intelligence service and working under Khomeini as the Intelligence Ministry's deputy on parliamentary affairs. Khamenei's selection of another intelligence service cofounder, Hejazi, to head the ministry reflected his inclination toward this community. Also a low-level cleric, Hejazi had begun his career as a commander in the Islamic revolutionary committees—a post-revolutionary military entity parallel to the police—and served as a deputy in the Intelligence Ministry's international affairs office. The appointments of Golpayegani and Hejazi were significant additionally because neither came directly from the seminary, a departure from Khomeini's practice. While unknown to the public, these figures were assigned critical positions and have served as confidants significantly affecting Khamenei's decisionmaking.

A Khamenei Booster, and the Strengthening of the Ruling Jurist

Sayyed Samsam al-Din Ghavami, the Friday prayer imam in Pardisan, a large district south of Qom, exemplifies Khamenei's favored type of emerging leader. Fifty-six years old, Ghavami began his career with the IRGC in the early years of the republic, commanding a unit in Tehran.³¹ He also designed the IRGC high school system, a project he started by converting the U.S. embassy building into the Guard's first high school, thereafter serving as its principal for two years in the mid-1980s. Gradually,

Ghavami positioned himself as a notable theoretician of *velayat-e faqih* and Islamic government. Having expressly promoted Khamenei's political views within the clerical establishment, he remains closely involved in the ideological training of IRGC commanders at the Imam Hussein University. He also serves as an auditing agent for Khamenei-linked Shia seminaries outside Iran,³² having traveled to dozens of countries over the years for this purpose.³³

In the wake of Iran's 2016 presidential vote, he expressed his gratification over “a miraculous election” between two clerical candidates, Hassan Rouhani and Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi, while voters ignored the lay candidates. “In a government ruled by a *faqih*,” he explained, “this is the appropriate direction that people took after a long time.” He added that “people's participation in the election results in the Islamic government's power.”³⁴

On February 2, 2020, while addressing the “Conference on the Supreme Leader's Intellectual System,” Ghavami indicated that he had begun a project in 2016 to introduce Khamenei's political views in Qom.³⁵ Since then, he explained, more than seven thousand clerics had participated. According to Ghavami's “Emirate and Imamate Unity Plan,”³⁶ as the project is known, clergy and collective prayer imams cooperate to promote the view that the Supreme Leader holds authority over all state affairs, running all three branches of government through his agents—namely, the president, Majlis members, and the judiciary chief.³⁷ The ruling jurist's authority, in this model, is absolute, without conditions or constraints.³⁸ Furthermore, according to the Emirate and Imamate Unity Plan, every region will be administered by an imam who acts within its geographical territory on behalf of the ruling jurist.³⁹

This applies as well to Khamenei's representatives outside Iran, including Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon. Accordingly, the Supreme Leader's authority is regarded as exceeding that of all other religious leaders, including *marjas* (sources of religious emulation), such as the Najaf-based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. An Islamic government, moreover, should follow the precedent set by

the Prophet Muhammad, whose rule was aimed at establishing a global government.⁴⁰ Ghavami, to this end, founded the Feqhi [Faqih] Institute of Islamic Management, which is tasked with training a new generation of agents and Islamizing the national education system. According to Ghavami, the institute advances a pan-Islamic jihadist worldview in a transnational context.⁴¹ Also, following Khamenei's guidance, he has advocated ceding full educational control to the clergy, from preschool until the end of high school.⁴²

Ghavami has expressed other views comports with Khamenei's, such as the notion that the Western humanities produce only "terrorism and injustice to others" and that "so much bloodshed and murder are products of the humanities." He grandly proclaims that "the West is about to fall and the future will be Iran's again."⁴³ Ghavami finally holds that elected members of the Assembly of Experts are "representatives" of the people, whose duty it is to protect "the 'divine office' that is the 'office of *umma* leadership' against any danger...The Supreme Leader is among the greatest [divine] gifts, and his protection is doubtless [everyone's] duty."⁴⁴

In a May 22, 2020, Friday prayer sermon, Ghavami discoursed:

We appreciate the Guardian Council for its unhesitating disqualification of those candidates who deserved to be disqualified. You exhilarated the Supreme Leader...For next year's presidential election, you are not permitted to support the individuals who have been tried before. Qualify the new and young individuals. We do not want [Ali] Larijani, [Saeed] Jalili, and [Eshaq] Jahangiri anymore. Don't be bashful!...There is religious democracy [*mardomsalari*] here, not Western democracy, which allows everyone to run for election...Let's get rid of experienced figures, namely those who showed a lack of full loyalty to Khamenei when they were in high government positions! We do not want a president who has his own ideology. We need him to be an agent for Imam Khamenei!⁴⁵

Like this statement by Ghavami, many others by Khamenei's acolytes show intentions for such a reimagined political dynamic.

Achieving Khamenei's Objectives

Since assuming office as Supreme Leader in 1989, Khamenei has used government resources to portray himself as a model ideologue and leader of the Muslim *umma* (community), despite widespread doubts about his religious credentials, a narrow, factionalist approach to politics, and a reputation for management incompetence. Regime propaganda casts the Supreme Leader as a *rabhar-e farzaneh* (wise leader) as well as a scholar who reads widely in religion, history, and literature, while scrawling marginalia in texts. With dozens of seminarian students, he leads classes three days a week on the highest level of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). He has also emerged as a commentator on broader topics viewed through his ideological lens, all toward the goal of creating an "Islamic civilization." Indeed, he appears to see himself as God's choice to carry out this grand plan for the *umma*.

As for Khamenei's actual ideas about Islamic ideology, they are informed by his totalitarian worldview, while borrowing, willy-nilly, from the discourses of Marxism, post-colonialism, and other leftist movements. But his approach ignores all wider cultural trends and basic realities and the appeal of modernity itself, which he believes should be supplanted by his version of an Islamic society. Because his belief in the West's imminent decline is metaphysical, not historical, nothing can alter this belief. In seeking to project a comprehensive set of solutions for the various problems he outlines, Khamenei has developed a colossal propaganda apparatus, with nerve centers located within seminaries, universities, and elsewhere throughout society.

Identifying an Enemy

Underlying all these efforts is Khamenei's theory of politics, which echoes that of Carl Schmitt, a German philosopher and lawyer who served the Nazi regime. Schmitt espoused an approach rooted in identifying and dispensing with enemies, while defending "friends."⁴⁶ As Schmitt put it, "the political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions."⁴⁷ Yet this enemy served as the focal point for all political maneuvering. Furthermore, politics in this view relies on the ever-present possibility of armed struggle and projection of military strength, the absence of which, in turn, renders politics moot.

Schmitt's volume *Political Theology* begins with the assertion, "The sovereign is he who decides on the exception." This statement perhaps intimates Khamenei's status as the absolute ruling jurist who can declare an "emergency," justifying the suspension of religious and state law. Here, the notion of the "state of exception" can be seen as legalizing the illegal. As sovereign, Khamenei believes in both his own omnipotence and that of the state. He sees only possibilities and no limits, functions of a divine promise that cannot be broken. In this equation, the law can be separated from society, instead serving the interests of the regime. The law is meant not to realize justice but to exert power. Therefore, the Islamic Republic, as any other totalitarian system, embraces rule by law, not rule of law. It is this spirit of totalitarian ideology that Khamenei expects the next president to preserve.

Yet for Khamenei to achieve his objectives will not be easy. The next president is therefore extraordinarily important to him for multiple reasons, including his age. This president could be the last he works with in his political life. At this delicate juncture, Khamenei does not want to face a president who challenges his authority over the executive branch instead of unquestionably implementing his

agenda. He needs to make sure the next president is devotedly loyal to him and committed to act as his soldier in the battlefield.

Getting Sanctions Lifted

A key issue on which the president will need to reflect Khamenei's will is the inevitable negotiations with the incoming Biden administration to lift sanctions on the oil industry and the banking system. Generally, of course, the Supreme Leader's attitude in approaching negotiations would hardly change from previous rounds. On one hand, he would lead them behind the scenes himself, micromanaging every last step on every minor detail, and ultimately make his own decisions about strategy and the deal's contours. Iran's new negotiation team, as well as the president, would thus have far less say on the process and outcome. On the other hand, Khamenei would not publicly and directly undertake any responsibility for the negotiations. Not only does he need to maintain his anti-American image, but he needs to escape the people's blame if negotiation fails to yield a desired result.

The Potential for Low Domestic Political Engagement

Given the country's badly faltering economy and the government's poor record in dealing with the coronavirus, the social mood could augur against robust participation in the 2021 presidential vote. The associated prospect of political turbulence will likely prompt Khamenei to ensure the next government is prepared to apply maximum brutality against any individual or group seen as instigating public demonstrations or acts of sabotage or subversion. Such resources will not be easily found outside the IRGC, the Supreme Leader's office, or his intelligence service. This explains why the next government, in Khamenei's thinking, must be closely aligned with the military and security forces and coordinate with them on social and economic decisions.

Besides gutting the country's democratic institutions, an increasingly repressive Islamic Republic regime has crippled civil society, weakened NGOs, and generally further darkened the public space, while encouraging moral decadence and undermining social solidarity. The clergy's alliance with the regime, meanwhile, is one of convenience, not conviction. Taken together, the national crisis pits an ever more militarized leadership against an unhappy populace groping for ways to express its needs. This dynamic does not bode well for an engaged electorate or for organized, effective protest and desired reforms in the years to come.

Implications for U.S.-Iran Relations

Although Iran's Supreme Leader will remain the decisionmaker with regard to issues concerning the United States, Iran's president nevertheless makes a difference. For Washington, the interesting question with respect to 2021 is which direction the Supreme Leader decides to pursue. Here—make no mistake—the outcome of the vote will be dictated by the conditions he establishes, as has been the case since 2001. Khamenei has usually held his cards close to his vest, acting only just before the vote to guarantee his desired outcome—which then is often described as a “surprising” choice by the people.

If he opts for a young *hezbollahi* candidate, then Washington should be prepared to test what that means for U.S.-Iran relations. Indeed, such an Iranian president could signal that Khamenei is open to taking relations in a new direction, whether toward even sharper confrontation or a mistrustful mutual standoff.

A young *hezbollahi* president, representing Khamenei and the IRGC in the executive branch, would function as Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf currently does in the Majlis and Ebrahim Raisi does in the judiciary. Moreover, one may expect the hardliner versus

moderate distinction to continue fading, replaced by a unitary voice, as has occurred in recent Iranian foreign policy, with the JCPOA being the exception. A monolithic Iran, in this sense, may be able to forge forward as long as Khamenei is alive. But after he passes from the scene, a structure centered on a single, powerful ruling jurist may be replaced by a more complicated cooperative leadership in which the IRGC predominates.

With such a complex leadership, changing decisively from the basic policy orientation of Khamenei's Islamic Republic will be difficult. Fewer policies are more fundamental to the regime than its approach toward Washington, which under the Supreme Leader is premised on “no war, no peace.” In other words, Iran will negotiate but will not seek normalization of U.S.-Iran relations under either the current or any future president. Beyond this starting point, the Supreme Leader's main objective will be to convince Washington to lift sanctions. And he aspires to regional hegemony but knows this cannot happen with the current U.S. military ground presence in the Middle East, explaining his dreams of an American exit.

Prospects for Negotiations

Even while showing an inclination to pivot to Asia and end its “forever wars” in the Middle East, the Trump administration settled on an apparently low-cost formula for keeping strong pressure on Iran, through a combination of sanctions and military actions—namely, the targeted killing of Iranian military commanders and possibly attacks on nuclear facilities. Khamenei therefore finds himself in a weak position with respect to the United States, even as the regime has evidently found work-arounds for selling its oil, in part taking advantage of world actors' disdain for America's go-it-alone approach.⁴⁸ Otherwise, he would not agree to return to the negotiating table. And should talks resume, Rouhani is almost certain to be excluded from them, and after that, banished along with his associates to a mode of post-presidency isolation. Strongly suggesting Rouhani's exclusion is Khamenei's longtime belittling of the president's diplomatic

achievements and permitting of state media and hardliner attacks on him.

Yet a hardline negotiating team would have no less motivation to reach a deal than a more “moderate” one. To be sure, talks with the Biden administration should hardly be construed as a move to boost broader relations between the two countries given a likely less punishing U.S. policy stance. Instead, the talks will occur because Tehran feels frustration and weakness produced by sanctions and international pressure.

A central dilemma for Khamenei in carrying out future talks will be his refusal to include Iran’s missile program or regional activities as possible chips. These precious assets indeed are considered his only real leverage with the United States and its allies. Given his apparent reluctance to cede ground on them, and his general defiance, one strains to imagine how the Supreme Leader will enter talks with a viable proposal. After all, even Khamenei knows he has to give something to get something.

Another dilemma for Khamenei would be the need for buy-in from his devotees outside Iran, such as Hezbollah, given the ultimate failure of the JCPOA. The high costs of the previous attempt, in which Iranian negotiators perhaps naively believed the U.S. approach would hold, are still painful. The Trump administration’s unflinching exit from the JCPOA left the Tehran regime embarrassed and exposed to new sanctions, rather than uplifted by sanctions relief and broader international acceptance. Yet Iran is unlikely to take steps, even if presented with a deal, to moderate its anti-Israel and anti-Saudi stances, along with its destabilizing regional activities. Tehran, indeed, will expect Washington to bear the burden of preventing Saudi or other sabotage of the deal, without changing its own behavior.

Iran has likewise consistently shown a refusal to honor the golden rule. While carping relentlessly about U.S. disrespect, the regime encourages the burning of American flags as a public ritual, joined with the “Death to America” mantra and followed

by “Allahu Akbar” (God is great). This pairing inextricably entwines American diabolism with Allah’s greatness.

The various dynamics at play suggest the Iranian negotiating team will remain unknown until the 2021 election. They also indicate that Khamenei’s final word on the process and expectations for talks will remain unknown until effectively the last minute. And once the talks begin, the Supreme Leader, who also serves as commander-in-chief of an economically weakened nation, is likely not to look outward to seek consensus but to rely increasingly on his own decisionmaking instincts. Iran’s diminished negotiating position relative to talks with the Obama team will harm prospects for a just deal, especially in light of Khamenei’s personal inclination to paranoia and delusion.

The Regime Change Question

A core Iranian demand in any talks will be for the United States to end its purported efforts at regime change through funding opposition entities, NGOs, and Persian-language media. This presents a conundrum for Washington, because a new agreement is most likely if the United States confines itself to the nuclear and missile program, while leaving out Iran’s aggressive and terrorist activities abroad. The foreign adventurism, though, is nothing but a mirror of Iranian totalitarianism at home. If totalitarian practices within Iran come under control, this change would do more than anything else to help prevent the regime from destabilizing the region.

While a Biden administration is unlikely to pursue a policy of regime change, the United States should certainly improve its efforts to persuade the Iranian people by its deeds that it regards them as friends who are unfortunate enough to have fallen hostage to the Iranian regime. In this sense, the Trump administration’s travel bans did much damage. Furthermore, the increasingly nationalist popular mood in Iran will be repulsed by perceived support for any group or effort seen to be aimed at disintegrating the territorial unity of Iran.

Finally, as seen during Obama's tenure, the removal of regime change from the menu will not transform the United States into a trustworthy adversary for Iran. Nor will this shift be seen among the nation's weary civil society and declining middle class as sufficient reason for optimism. The Biden team should likewise remain alert to Iranian attempts to use the negotiation period as an opportunity to further securitize society and violently suppress the public. In turn, U.S. officials must speak out against any Islamic Republic attempts to violate human rights on an individual level or suppress civil society collectively. As the Obama administration's efforts showed, any thought that talks could lead to a state approaching normalization would be wishful thinking and lead to disappointment. To emerge successfully, the United States must bear in mind the well-being of the Iranian people. Khamenei will only be inclined to compromise if he perceives his domestic opposition to be formidable and if he feels his actions abroad carry a cost. If he senses a weak opposition, on the other hand, he may resist compromise, even if this stance holds consequences for him.

Supreme Leader's Response to Biden's Election

Ayatollah Khamenei will likely show public indifference to Joe Biden's victory, in part to maintain a firm position in future potential negotiations and in part to avoid showing weakness by suggesting he had preferred Biden over President Trump in the first place. This reaction must be regarded as largely genuine, and not only as a negotiation tactic. Khamenei's mistrust toward the United States is fundamentally ideological rather than political, resisting historical dynamism and changes in reality.

In January 2009, President Barack Obama sent Khamenei a private letter in which he referred to the "Islamic Republic of Iran," a first for a U.S. leader

and an indication that his administration would not pursue a policy of regime change. Two months later, in his Nowruz speech, Khamenei revealed the confidential communication, but only as a means of undermining it as a potential bridge between the two countries. Recognizing international excitement over Obama's election, including in Iran, Khamenei grimly referred to an "iron hand in a velvet glove."⁴⁹ When it comes to America's Iran policy, Khamenei views Democrats and Republicans as pursuing the same objectives, only through different means and rhetoric.

And he considers neither tolerable. This is because the ayatollah views the policy replacement for regime change as one centered on promoting internal political transformation, rooted in democracy and human rights, including for civil society and NGOs. For Khamenei, peaceful reforms to the Islamic Republic pose an existential threat no less serious than revolution or regime change spurred by a foreign actor. Even U.S. efforts at cultural outreach are perceived as part of a soft war, or cultural invasion, that is fundamentally more harmful than a military attack. This is why the Biden administration should waste no time trying to convince the Supreme Leader otherwise. His political ideology and anti-Americanism are impervious to persuasion from even the most genial U.S. personalities.

Another cause for Iranian skepticism involves the perception of the Trump administration's "economic war" on the Islamic Republic. Future talks based on "compliance for compliance," therefore, will strike the Iranian leadership as unjust; only material and practical compensation for the nation's enormous suffering could create the basis of trust in a future agreement. Likewise, material offers alone would indicate respect for the regime's dignity and suggest a U.S. ability to honor agreements in the long term. On this count, the JCPOA trajectory has darkened Iranian views about U.S. trustworthiness, and Iranian wariness about dealing with Americans will be hard to shake.

Joe Biden—different as his demeanor is from

Trump's—embodies the “Great Satan” for Khamenei as well. After all, it was the former vice president's achievement to assemble an international coalition to support the anti-Iran sanctions regime, with its isolating effects. The Supreme Leader rues the associated damage to his country's economy, and does not regard Biden sympathetically. The president-elect is thus comparable to Trump, the figure behind the current “maximum pressure” policy.

A measure of optimism and idealism from the new U.S. administration regarding Iran will be unsurprising. But immediately confronting this optimism will be an opposite position from Europe, born of long experience, and particularly of a sense that U.S.-Iran talks often ignore European demands. Rouhani once described the United States as the West's “elder chief,” allowing Iran to ignore Europe as a meaningful player in talks. But President-Elect Biden's relationship with Iran cannot succeed in such a way, and will face serious obstacles absent coordination with Europe's main powers.

Policy Recommendations

The new U.S. administration, recognizing past trends, should not expect good-faith exchanges with the Islamic Republic. The regime's anti-Americanism is sure to persist, with Khamenei regarding the United States as the “ultimate enemy.” Regardless, Washington should promote Iranian civil society because this approach serves U.S. interests along with the cause of global peace and security. It also represents a moral imperative that can hamper the regime's ability to violate human rights. But advancing such a policy will require careful U.S. adherence to guidelines such as the following:

- **Avoid funding any Iranian political or opposition group, whether inside or outside the country.** Financial dependence on foreign countries will utterly dismantle and delegitimize a political entity, destroying its ability to influence people. The greater a group's political and economic

dependence, the weaker its social power base and political impact.

- **Privatize public diplomacy.** U.S. public diplomacy efforts in Iran are increasingly feckless. The government's Voice of America Persian television particularly has lost status and credibility in the media market, and is known for abysmal viewership. No further evidence is needed to support a revised approach, in which the current \$20 million-plus VOA Persian budget should be redirected to one or multiple private carriers that could produce a more competitive, compelling, and innovative media product.
- **Remove barriers to intellectual and other content.** The Iranian people are suffering from isolation as a result of the regime's totalitarian cultural policies, along with international economic pressure. Yet forces beyond domestic censorship and cultural suppression threaten the nation's already wounded spirit. Namely, Iranian academics have experienced increasingly constricted access to Western institutions in recent years, including to the online services of Western universities and libraries, to Western books and journals, and to academic conferences and workshops. Private companies including Google, Apple, and Amazon have stopped providing some essential services to Iranians, even outside Iran. For instance, two years ago, Amazon stopped publishing or selling Persian books on its website, an avenue previously helpful in countering domestic Iranian censorship and facilitating cyber activity against the Iranian regime. Intellectuals thus struggle to publish their products online. The absence of major credit cards within the Iranian system further hinders citizens' ability to purchase necessary products online. The Biden administration can respond by coordinating with the private sector to find creative solutions to reduce such barriers.
- **Boost Iranian social solidarity through increased online access.** The most dangerous enemy of any totalitarian regime, Iran's included, is a cohesive community with open

lines of communication. Therefore, overcoming regime-imposed barriers to Internet access, as well as attempts at mis- and disinformation, requires better online access. The United States can thus help Iranians enhance their vital social bonds by working to expand such access through aggressive initiatives to open up the online space.

- **Recognize Iranian citizens' dignity and national pride.** The United States should treat Iranians as it would other nationalities when adopting rules and regulations regarding travel or other interactions. ❖

NOTES

1. Qalibaf was born in Torqabeh, a northeastern Iranian city near Khamenei's hometown of Mashhad. He has always been regarded as close to the Supreme Leader, perhaps despite his self-identification as a "technocrat," a concept Khamenei despises. Qalibaf also fashions himself as a military strongman/national savior in the mold of Muhammad Reza Shah or Kemal Ataturk. In July 1999, Qalibaf played a central role in the crackdown on the student movement, the first massive anti-regime uprising against the Islamic Republic. (For a history of unrest in the country, see Saeid Golkar, *Protests and Regime Suppression in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, Policy Note 85 [Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2020], <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/protests-and-regime-suppression-in-post-revolutionary-iran>.) For its part, the vote for the eleventh Majlis saw disqualification across the ideological spectrum, including for conservatives such as Ali Motahhari, who suggested that the Majlis retain a measure of independence from the leader. Motahhari was thus accused of failing to show fealty to *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurisprudent).
2. See, e.g., "Syria's Assad Visits Iran in Rare Trip Abroad," Al Jazeera, February 25, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/25/syrias-assad-visits-iran-in-rare-trip-abroad>.
3. Available at Deutsche Welle Persian, "Will Rouhani's Impeachment Happen in Parliament?" (in Persian), July 11, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3isL0fP>. The quote originally appeared in *Khaneh-ye Mellat*, the Majlis website.
4. See "Who's Behind Rouhani's Impeachment?" (in Persian), Radio France Internationale, July 11, 2020, <https://washin.st/2Gaz0gw>.
5. See this video clip (in Persian) on *Aparat*, "Controversy in Parliament During Zarif's Speech," <https://www.aparat.com/v/raif6>.
6. "Statements in Video Consultation with the Eleventh Islamic Consultative Assembly" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=46045>.
7. Ibid.
8. "The Election's General Policies" (in Persian), Khamenei.ir, October 15, 2016, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=34642>.
9. A bill passed recently by the Majlis—after being approved by the Guardian Council, suggesting its radical-authoritarian character—placed a number requirements on presidential candidates: religious or political stature; Iranian origin with Iranian citizenship; management skill; good reputation; trustworthiness and piety; master's degree or equivalent; age between forty-five and seventy; good health; military service card indicating two years of compulsory service; no illegal act in any previous election; no history of acting against the government; no past betrayal of commitments to the government; no criminal conviction or act resulting in the deprivation of social rights; no security infractions; no role in consolidating the prerevolutionary leadership; no addiction to drugs, including psychedelics; at least eight years of management-level service in government; devotion to the national faith, Twelver Shiism.
10. Hossein Shariatmadari, "'The Headless Government': The Anti-Regime Conspiratorial Project Launches" (in Persian), *Kayhan*, October 20, 2020, available at <https://bit.ly/3pmGcaU>.
11. "Mohammad Reza Khatami, The Reformists' Most Popular but Impossible Candidate for 2021 Election" (in Persian), *Salameno*, August 31, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ngczGn>.
12. Prime examples of electoral authoritarianism are Russia under Putin and Hungarian regime. In both cases, election was successfully used in the service of the security apparatus's power grab, and the opposition faced a fatal defeat. For Putin's authoritarianism, see Kate C. Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Putin's Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, Palgrave, 2020). For the post-Soviet regimes and their failed democracy, see works of Aviezer Tucker including *Democracy Against Liberalism: Its Rise and Fall* (New York: Polity, 2020) and *The Legacies of Totalitarianism: A Theoretical Framework* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

13. A recent example of such tensions set the IRGC against the Ministry of Health with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic, with the Guards having gained increasing control over the country's healthcare system, including some of its best hospitals and most highly trained doctors. Khamenei himself ordered the armed forces to create a medical base for fighting the virus, causing significant struggles between the IRGC and the civilian Health Ministry over how to handle the crisis. The Guards have seemingly won that fight so far. Some civilian officials are still criticizing the militarized approach, but the trend of increasing IRGC interference in government policy seems destined to continue well after the pandemic—especially now that the incoming parliament will be heavily under IRGC influence.
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16. “Who Is Akbar Tabari?” BBC Persian, January 15, 2019.
17. Islamic Republic News Agency, “Qom Representative in Majlis Asks in Tweet for Financial Transparency with Regard to Larijani's School,” June 8, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2UiJ8Hl>.
18. Full text of the speech is available on Khamenei's website: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=17597>; the speech is referenced in Scott Peterson, “On the Road, Iran's Khamenei Sets Stage for a Less Democratic Future,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 17, 2011, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/1017/On-the-road-Iran-s-Khamenei-sets-stage-for-a-less-democratic-future>.
19. “Ali Larijani: Ali Khamenei Issued the Order to Reform the Country's Structure” (in Persian), *Shabtab*, February 6, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3pyeiJ6>.
20. The link, formerly available at *Donya-e Eqtesad*, is no longer live.
21. “Hashemi [Rafsanjani's] Account of His Meeting with the Supreme Leader and His Views on Parliamentary and Presidential Systems” (in Persian), *Hamshahri*, April 7, 2012, <https://bit.ly/36EOJNP>.
22. “The Letter by 150 Iranian Majlis Members on Amending the Constitution,” BBC Persian, May 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-48420844>.
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26. Aviezer Tucker, “Why We Need Totalitarianism,” *American Interest*, April 14, 2015, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/04/14/why-we-need-totalitarianism/>.
27. Islamic Republic News Agency, “In His Virtual Meeting with Representatives of Student Organizations, the Leader of the Islamic Revolution: ‘A Young and *Hezbollahi* Government Is the Only Solution for the Country's Problems” (in Persian), May 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ndkfJy>.
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