



Supreme Succession

Who Will Lead Post-Khamenei Iran?

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Front cover: Assembly of Experts, Tehran, Iran.

Executive Summary

WHAT WILL HAPPEN to the Islamic Republic of Iran when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is no longer in power? Although there is little reason to believe that he will soon pass from the scene, his advanced age, rumors of health problems, and the recent fate of other regional rulers mean that nothing is certain. Accordingly, the United States and its allies would benefit from a fuller understanding of how the succession process will unfold and how it could affect the regime's internal and external posture.

Two decades ago, concerns about Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's successor led regime elites to make a decision they later regretted: the appointment of an heir while the Supreme Leader was still alive. Therefore, the regime will likely ensure that any attempt to plan for the post-Khamenei era remains behind closed doors, rendering the heir unapparent. Regime leaders could also decide to repeat history by altering the constitution if they believe it would safeguard their interests during transition. In 1989, the regime responded to a succession crisis by changing Iranian law, allowing lower-ranking clerics to qualify for the post of Supreme Leader, eliminating the position of prime minister, and concentrating executive power in the hands of the president. Hints of a similar approach to the next succession are already evident.

Furthermore, if history is any indicator, the formal succession process laid out by the constitution may not hold. Technically, the Assembly of Experts is in charge of choosing a successor, with a provisional council—consisting of the president, the judiciary chief, and a member of the Guardian Council—temporarily assuming the duties of Supreme Leader between the time Khamenei leaves power and his successor takes office. Another key body, the Expediency Council, has the authority to replace members of the provisional council if necessary. Although this temporary leadership could remain in power indefinitely, the regime is more likely to appoint a true successor as quickly as possible in order to avoid damaging its credibility or creating room for political crisis.

As in 1989, however, it is difficult to believe that the Supreme Leader's heir will be chosen by the Assembly of Experts alone. Khamenei was selected by influential political elites who pressured the assembly to vote as they did, and the circle of decisionmakers will be even smaller today given the extent to which he has consolidated power during his rule.

For one thing, Khamenei has marginalized the first generation of revolutionary politicians, particularly Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (the head of the Expediency Council, whom the Supreme Leader may soon oust from that post) and Mir Hossein Mousavi (the opposition Green Movement leader who remains under house arrest). At the same time, Khamenei has refashioned the political spectrum by elevating a new generation of weak politicians who owe their credentials to him.

Second, the changes to Iran's political landscape have left the clergy with little influence over the country's management, greatly diminishing its ability to affect the succession process. Many clerics now view the Supreme Leader position as military rather than one of autonomous religious authority.

Third, the power of the president is under challenge. Khamenei has already spoken publicly about changing the presidential election system to a parliamentary model in which the legislature chooses the executive instead of the people. If that happens, the president would not be able to use his personal popularity to buttress his position, and the parliament—guided by the Supreme Leader—would have even more control over him. This would reduce the prospect of the president becoming a power broker in the succession process.

Fourth, and most important, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—which controls the military, the nuclear program, and a major portion of Iran's economy—will likely be the main player in the succession process. In 1989, power was mostly in the hands of civilians, and although Khomeini was officially commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he never did the job alone and always conceded authority

to others. For its part, the IRGC was a revolutionary military force and did not have a major political or economic role. Today, however, Khamenei personally runs the armed forces and has allowed the Revolutionary Guard to enter politics and take over at least a third of the economy. Indeed, Khamenei is the most powerful individual in Iran in large part because of his reliance on the IRGC, and it is difficult to imagine the institution allowing the Experts Assembly alone to determine his successor. The IRGC will also play a key role in assuaging the regime's worries about popular unrest during transition.

Of course, the military may not speak with one voice about succession when the time comes. The IRGC has become a politico-economic complex with various competing factions that hold different interests in many sectors. Although Khamenei has full control over them and manages their factionalism, the power balance within the military would surely change in the absence of such a commander. More radical IRGC elements would probably have a better chance of coming out on top given their greater penchant for resorting to force. In other words, Khamenei's passing could result in the government becoming even more militarized and radical.

In light of these factors, the regime's first challenge post-Khamenei will be to create a united voice in the IRGC. Whether or not each individual guardsman is loyal to Khamenei and the ideals of the Islamic Republic, they all generally believe that they should be the regime's primary beneficiaries given how much they have sacrificed for the Islamic Republic compared to the clerics. Accordingly, the focus will be on distributing power (political, economic, and social) among influential IRGC commanders while keeping it from civilian politicians.

Although the next Supreme Leader would probably be under heavy IRGC control and hence have little power of his own (at least at first), he would still be the figure responsible for formally maintaining the Islamic Republic's legitimacy and divine authority. Accordingly, Khamenei and senior military leaders no doubt already have their (largely overlapping) lists of successors in hand. Regardless of which candidate comes out

on top, those who have power now will likely keep it after Khamenei's death.

As for foreign policy post-Khamenei, some IRGC commanders—whether out of genuine belief or as leverage in their internal fights—will likely seek to reverse Iran's hostile stance toward the West and look for opportunities to change the government's current course on certain issues. Yet the regime's posture has been deeply entrenched by Khamenei, so outsiders must temper their hopes for major change after his death. The past three decades have established a pattern among Iranian leaders: those who hold the most power are anti-American; those who lose power tend to become pro-Western. Even Khamenei was not seen as a radical anti-American politician before assuming the office of Supreme Leader—his leftist rivals were the ones who seized the U.S. embassy in 1979 and led the country's anti-American discourse. Yet because he was relatively weak in his first years of leadership, Khamenei hijacked that discourse and became even more anti-American than the leftists, who gradually abandoned that outlook and became reformists.

Since the next Supreme Leader will probably hold a nominal position at first, the question of whether he would be willing to engage with the West is not especially important. The real question is whether the IRGC will refashion Iranian politics by negotiating with the United States and dropping its defiant attitude. Mounting pressure over the regime's nuclear policies is seriously harming the country's economy, and the IRGC will probably need to take action on this issue post-Khamenei in order to strengthen its position. Opening up to the West, and especially to the United States, would help military leaders gain domestic popularity and international legitimacy while restoring the broken economy.

Still, it is unclear whether the IRGC would be prepared to roll back Iran's nuclear progress to reach this goal. Iran's future nuclear policy may depend on when Khamenei dies and whether the country has achieved nuclear weapons capability by that time. If the IRGC inherits a regime with that capability, it might regard an opening to the West as a sign of weakness or even a national security threat. Yet, if it inherits an Iran

without the bomb, its first priority would be establishing full political and economic control rather than defying the West through nuclear posturing. The international community must therefore not let Tehran acquire that capability, since a nuclear Iran under a military government might be even more dangerous than a nuclear Iran under Khamenei. After all, a military government would likely care less about political legitimacy and more about power and effectiveness, and would not hesitate to use force if necessary.

Assuming Iran does not reach that nuclear threshold, the IRGC's main priority during a transition would likely center on consolidating power in its hands, and acute confrontation with the West would make that goal more difficult. The IRGC seems well aware of the falseness behind the "rally 'round the flag" assumption—the notion that provoking armed conflict with Israel and the United States would inspire the Iranian people to express nationalist solidarity with the government.

In light of these considerations, the Supreme Leader's death could present a unique opportunity for Washington to encourage changes in the regime's hostile foreign

policy. Even if it could not convince post-Khamenei Tehran to open up to the United States, Washington could at least ensure that the IRGC's ambitions do not jeopardize the interests of other countries in the region. Toward that end, it is crucial that the United States and its European partners begin establishing lines of communication with the IRGC's various factions sooner rather than later, since these factions represent Iran's future leadership. The regime's defiant nuclear policy will not change under Ayatollah Khamenei unless he is politically weakened. He has identified himself with the current nuclear posture, and if he were to backpedal on the issue as a result of U.S. pressure, he would face a major, perhaps unbearable, political crisis that could cost him his position. In other words, the quest for nuclear weapons has become a matter of life and death for him, and only the real threat of imminent military action might change his mind.

Therefore, what matters most is reaching out to the Islamic Republic's future leaders within the IRGC. If such communication proved successful, it might even give the Guard enough confidence to challenge Khamenei's uncompromising policies while he is still alive.

Who Will Lead Post-Khamenei Iran?

OVER THE PAST two decades, and in the wake of the controversial 2009 presidential election, real power in Iran has been consolidated in the hands of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei more than with anyone else, including President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. As head of the government and, more significantly, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Khamenei has either sidelined or suppressed all of his domestic rivals, allowing him to abandon consensual governance by relying on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The succession process that will follow his eventual departure is therefore much more important than the next presidential election, assuming there even is one.

To be sure, there is little reason to believe that Khamenei will soon pass from the scene. Besides the IRGC, Iran has no real power center capable of forcing him to abdicate. And even the IRGC shows no evidence of potentially disobeying his orders or developing a circle of leadership independent from him.¹ There are reasons to hope for political change in the future, including the scale of the crisis that followed the rigged 2009 election, the emergence of a mass opposition movement, mounting dissatisfaction with the economic situation, social and cultural suppression, and rapid fragmentation of the political elite. Yet no indications have emerged that Khamenei will be forced to step down any time in the foreseeable future (though of course the same could have been said in mid-2010 about Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak or Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi).

The most likely scenario for Khamenei's exit is death by natural causes. Rumors began to spread a few years ago that he suffered from health problems, though none of them were public knowledge other than depression and an injury sustained during a failed 1981 assassination attempt. Khamenei is not likely to die soon, though at seventy-two he is not a young man. And even if he were gravely ill, news to that effect might not emerge until he was near death; Iran's previous two leaders—Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi—both concealed their serious illnesses for quite some time.

In light of these uncertainties and Khamenei's near-total control of the polity, this paper analyzes several key issues that should inform Washington's near- and long-term decisionmaking on Iran: namely, the likelihood that Tehran will designate a successor in advance, the formal procedure for choosing a new Supreme Leader, the most likely designation process if the formal procedure is bypassed (a highly probable scenario), the successor's role in the political life of the Islamic Republic, and the potential emergence of a de facto military regime under the IRGC.

The Hard Core of the Regime

Even after three decades, the Islamic Republic has yet to leave the revolutionary stage that began in 1979, failing to either normalize its politics or build the state and its institutions. Upon assuming power, Khomeini deliberately created institutions parallel to the government, arguing that shah loyalists might use military and other means to subvert the new regime while it was still weak. These institutions were supposed to be provisional; after power was consolidated in the hands of the revolutionaries, they would disappear. Yet a strong, armed opposition (the Mujahedin-e Khalq) and the eight-year Iran-Iraq War gave the regime a pretext to keep its parallel bodies intact, and to rely on and invest in them even more than government institutions.

Khamenei's two-decade rule has only entrenched this approach. Today, the IRGC, the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled, the Revolutionary Court, and the Special Court of Clergy are among the revolutionary institutions that work directly under the Supreme Leader's supervision. Through these and other bodies, a gigantic politico-economic, military, and cultural complex has emerged separately from the government's judicial, legislative, and executive branches. Unlike the presidency and legislature, none of the positions in this multidimensional complex are elected: the Supreme Leader directly appoints the various officials who run the military (the army, IRGC, and police), state media (which monopolize television

and radio broadcasting in Iran), clerical establishment, and numerous foundations, endowments, and shrines. These institutions are not accountable to the cabinet or parliament, only to the Supreme Leader. They do not pay taxes, and they receive a government budget in addition to their own financial resources.²

The Supreme Leader's political strength stems from his control over this complex. By relying on it, he maintains his permanent position, micromanaging the affairs of all three branches of government to become the ultimate source of policy regardless of who occupies the presidency or parliament. His decrees trump the constitution, ordinary law, religious law, and all decrees by other Shiite jurists. He has become not only the highest source of political authority, but also the figure who defines Islam itself.³ By virtue of two doctrines—*velayat-e faqih* (“guardianship of the jurist-prudent”) and *maslahat* (“regime expediency”)—the Supreme Leader is the political system's center of gravity. Islamic ideology is identified with the state and the apparatuses of power, creating a kind of perfect unity in a tyrannical system whose tyrant is proclaimed to be religiously infallible. The cult of personality that Khamenei cultivates through state propaganda and the educational system has made many Iranians believe that the Supreme Leader is the heart of the regime, and that the government's life or death depends on his will.

The fact that all state institutions have been significantly weakened in favor of the Supreme Leader makes succession both complicated and unpredictable. The most important issue is not so much who will assume the position after Khamenei's departure, but rather how—and how much—power will be transferred. To answer this question, it is useful to look back to 1989, when Ayatollah Khomeini passed away and Khamenei took his place.

No Heir Apparent Will Be Appointed

Two decades ago, concerns about the first Supreme Leader's successor led regime elites to make a decision that produced a bitter result: the appointment of an heir while Khomeini was still alive. Therefore, the regime will likely ensure that any attempt to plan for the post-Khamenei era draws a serious lesson from the

past: namely, to avoid publicizing the succession plan and leave the heir unapparent.⁴

After Khomeini suffered a heart attack in 1979, his practical role was considerably reduced. Although he maintained the title of Supreme Leader for the next ten years, a triangle of close advisors—his son Ahmad Khomeini, future president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and, to a lesser extent, Khamenei—were influential in running the country. Khomeini's failing health and advanced age led this triangle and other high-ranking officials to contemplate possible successors.⁵ Even Western media reports periodically noted Khomeini's health problems and asserted that he was preparing to cede power.

The Islamic Republic's first constitution stipulated that the Supreme Leader be chosen from among those *marjas*—top Shiite religious authorities with the power to issue fatwas—who had both a considerable following and familiarity with political affairs. This created a problem: although most *marjas* had clear political opinions, they were typically unfamiliar with statecraft. More important, it was extremely difficult to find a *marja* with both a revolutionary background and Khomeini's political and juridical views. At the time, most prominent *marjas*—such as Abu al-Qasem Khoi (1899–1992), Muhammad Reza Golpayegani (1999–1993), and Shahab al-Din Marashi Najafi (1897–1990)—were traditionalists. Accordingly, they rejected Khomeini's interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*—the notion that the Supreme Leader should rule as a stand-in for the “Hidden Imam” and as God's representative on earth—which was the basis of the Islamic Republic's legitimacy and functionality.

Revolutionary clerics who had not attained *marja* status were concerned that after Khomeini's death, these traditionalist *marjas* would be able to take over the government due to the constitution's emphasis on the regime's Islamic nature. Golpayegani in particular showed his lust for power by sending several letters to Khomeini expressing concern about government practices not being in complete accordance with sharia (Islamic law).⁶ High-ranking officials believed that if *marjas* like Golpayegani took power, they would attempt to implement sharia regardless

of the requirements of a modern state. As mentioned previously, Khomeini's views on *velayat-e faqih* and *maslahat-e nezam* (primacy of preserving the Islamic Republic over any other principle, including Islamic law and the constitution) had enabled regime officials to break the impasses of sharia and find legitimate ways to bypass the conflict between law and the necessities of everyday governance. Obviously, Khomeini was not a traditionalist *marja*, and he often criticized juridical views on Islam that did not deal with the reality of statecraft.

The only palatable option, then, was to appoint Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri (1923–2009) as Khomeini's successor through the Assembly of Experts—with, of course, Khomeini's approval. A few high-ranking officials, including Rafsanjani, planned this move mainly in order to block any traditionalist *marja* from claiming power. Montazeri had a boldly revolutionary background as a well-known Khomeini disciple who spent many years in prison under the shah. He helped Khomeini expand his financial network before the revolution by raising funds from wealthy traditional businessmen and encouraging worshippers to follow the ayatollah and pay their religious taxes to him. Although Montazeri was not considered a *marja* before 1979, he later opened offices in Qom and other cities both in Iran and abroad, attracting followers and collecting taxes of his own.

Khomeini's deference to Montazeri as a jurist who could find Islamic solutions for juridical dead ends was equally important. Whenever new issues arose as a result of state Islamization, Montazeri was noted for exercising *ijtihad*, the intellectual faculty and juridical methodology used to understand Islamic law based on sacred texts (i.e., the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and the twelve Shiite Imams).⁷ He was also the only *marja* who had preached *velayat-e faqih* for several years and published his course in four volumes. Although he was the only Shiite jurist who worked on the subject extensively, his interpretation of the extent of the jurisprudent's authority was nevertheless greatly limited when compared to Khomeini's.⁸

In November 1985, the Assembly of Experts officially appointed Montazeri as successor, with Rafsanjani apparently playing an important role in the decision.⁹ This choice, however, proved to be problematic. First, even before the revolution, Montazeri had been a controversial figure in Shiite seminaries. His support for Ali Shariati's work¹⁰ and for Nematollah Salehi Najaf Abadi, the author of *Eternal Martyr*, generated a strong reaction from traditional clerics.¹¹ Many clerics—including those affiliated with Ayatollah Golpayegani—blamed him for writing a laudatory introduction to *Eternal Martyr* and encouraging young people to read Shariati.¹² Before the revolution, some clerics even declared him an apostate, causing Montazeri followers in Isfahan to kill Ayatollah Abul Hassan Shams Abadi, one of his known critics. That murder only intensified the clerical establishment's hatred of Montazeri. The act was attributed to Mehdi Hashemi, the brother of Montazeri's son-in-law; Hashemi was tried and executed after the revolution on various charges, including his involvement in the murder.¹³

Despite the fact that Montazeri's juridical and theological credentials were accepted by most of the clergy after the revolution, traditional clerics still did not approve of his radical revolutionary attitude. He shared with Khomeini a radical interpretation of Shia Islam, and he advocated exporting the revolution by sending representatives to various Muslim countries and forming organizations such as the Liberation Movements Unit (*Vahed-e Nehzat-haye Azadi Bakhsh*), which pursued extremist agendas aimed at overthrowing Western-allied regional governments and bringing Islamists to power to fight the United States and Israel.¹⁴ Similarly, his son Muhammad Montazeri (1944–1981)—a low-ranking cleric who spent most of his life in guerrilla warfare and the shah's prisons—formed the Revolutionary Organization of Islamic Masses, an international Islamist body that justified the use of violence in exporting the revolution. Muhammad's radical behavior after the revolution damaged his father's reputation, especially among the clerical establishment.¹⁵

Even before being appointed as Khomeini's successor or obtaining an official title, Montazeri acted

as though he were the country's second-in-command. He appointed university representatives, counseled officials on various issues, and tried to influence major and minor policies, both domestic and foreign. He even created a kind of government within the government, which caused severe problems in managing the state and armed forces, where he had devoted followers. He also criticized the government's strategy during the Iran-Iraq War, especially after Rafsanjani was appointed as Khomeini's deputy for the armed forces (i.e., the de facto commander-in-chief). In one public speech, Montazeri even asked Rafsanjani to resign from his post as speaker of the parliament and instead devote his time to fighting the war. Montazeri's continuous public criticism undermined both Khomeini and Rafsanjani's position.¹⁶

Montazeri also opposed engaging Washington when Iran needed to buy weapons and various technologies from the United States. It was Mehdi Hashemi who revealed U.S. national security advisor Robert McFarlane's clandestine trip to Tehran, destroying the entire diplomatic and economic deal. Indeed, Montazeri's entourage was extremely anti-American, and he used these events to both gain popularity at home and ally himself with Arab nationalist leaders and communist governments and groups abroad.

Despite his intervention in almost all government affairs, Montazeri was regarded as alien to statecraft and management skills. Even when he headed the Constitutional Assembly after the revolution, he admitted that he could not chair the body as effectively as his deputy, Muhammad Hosseini Beheshti, who wound up leading the assembly from beginning to end. His criticism of government policies stemmed partly from his idealism and partly from his lack of management knowledge.¹⁷ Therefore, he was heavily influenced by his entourage—his son-in-law Hadi Hashemi, Mehdi Hashemi, and their circle. This was deeply worrisome for both the political opposition and those regime leaders who wanted to pass from the revolutionary stage to the consolidation period and make Iranian policy more realistic. Khomeini and Rafsanjani in particular were striving to open the country to the West and end Iran's isolation, which

had cost the nation dearly in the war. The political elite believed that Montazeri's succession would jeopardize the Islamic Republic and prevent technocrats from rebuilding Iran. To redefine the country's relationship with the West and adapt its economy to the free market, they deemed it crucial to oust Montazeri, who opposed foreign loans both before and after Khomeini's passing.¹⁸

Most important, from the first day Montazeri was appointed as Khomeini's successor, the friction between the Supreme Leader and Montazeri's entourage never abated. In particular, the 1987 broadcast of Mehdi Hashemi's prison confession followed by his execution deeply hurt Montazeri and made him feel betrayed by Ahmad Khomeini and the Supreme Leader's other close advisors. And in 1988, his final year as heir apparent, he opposed the mass killing of prisoners affiliated with Mujahedin-e Khalq and other opposition groups—an act that had been directly ordered by Ayatollah Khomeini. Montazeri's objection was portrayed as support for such groups, a perception that strengthened Khomeini's motivation for dismissing him.¹⁹

Montazeri's dismissal created a lengthy crisis of legitimacy for many reasons. First, although many revolutionaries were expelled from power, marginalized, imprisoned, exiled, or executed during the Islamic Republic's inception, none had Montazeri's religious and political clout. Once Montazeri was disgraced, a chain of aggressive actions against him and his family, friends, and followers commenced, which sent a strong wave of insecurity through the political elite.

Second, Montazeri was not only a true founder of the Islamic Republic, but also someone who elaborated on the principle of *velayat-e faqih* in a more extensive (albeit methodically different) manner than even Khomeini. When the greatest theoretician of *velayat-e faqih* and a theological pillar of the regime became a victim of said system, it put the credibility of the principle itself under suspicion. The bitter quarrel between Khomeini and Montazeri cost them both and disillusioned many of their followers.

Third, since Montazeri was the only grand ayatollah whose theological and political views resembled

Khomeini's, it was almost impossible to find anyone of similar stature to replace him without jeopardizing the regime's functionality. As discussed previously, other grand ayatollahs consistently criticized the regime for not being Islamic enough, spurring Khomeini to elaborate his principle of regime interests trumping sharia. Obviously, traditional ayatollahs did not agree with Khomeini about the state's authority to suspend Islamic law in any circumstance.

All in all, the experience of publicly designating an heir apparent in advance was, at best, problematic for the Islamic Republic. Furthermore, the regime was able to choose a successor in short order after Khomeini died. The succession went smoothly, even though—or perhaps because—the Islamic Republic was at a moment of great crisis. The acceptance of the UN resolution and ceasefire with Iraq after eight years of devastating war, along with Montazeri's dismissal, Khomeini's fatwa calling for Muslims to kill the author Salman Rushdie, and his order shortly before his death to revise the constitution, had all led the country to its biggest crisis since the revolution. Today, Iran's leaders seem confident that the next succession can be handled without such perturbations.

The Formal Succession Process May Not Matter Much

Iran's constitution lays down a clear procedure for designating a Supreme Leader's successor. Yet in all likelihood, the officials charged with this responsibility under the law will not be the ones making the key decisions. In fact, the regime may bypass the constitutional procedure altogether.

The previous succession did not follow the constitutional requirements. As mentioned before, Khomeini appointed a council to revise the constitution shortly before his death.²⁰ Before the council had the opportunity to vote on a final amended version of the charter, however, Khomeini died. The changes were intended to separate religious authority from political authority, perhaps totally. In particular, they allowed an ordinary ayatollah or *mujtahid*—not just a *marja-e taqlid* (grand ayatollah)—to become Supreme Leader. Indeed, immediately after Khomeini's death,

Khamenei was selected as Supreme Leader even though he was not a *mujtahid*, let alone a *marja-e taqlid*. In other words, since the amended version of the constitution was not validated by the vote of council members and a people's referendum, Khomeini's successor needed to be a *marja-e taqlid*.²¹ The amended constitution that would have permitted this choice was legally invalid without a popular referendum. Yet Iran's leaders deeply feared the outbreak of chaos if they waited to choose a new Supreme Leader, so they decided not to wait for the constitutional council to finish its sessions or for a referendum. Thus Khamenei's election was technically illegal.

In theory, Khamenei could decide to change the succession rules once again, perhaps designating a group to revise the constitution accordingly. Legally, only he can order such revisions, though they still technically require a referendum to be enacted. Yet given the fact that holding such a public vote could present political difficulties for the regime, Khamenei might be unwilling to amend the constitution in the near future. Instead, the 1989 precedent suggests that the regime may simply ignore the formal rules for succession if they prove to be inexpedient. The Islamic Republic has placed great emphasis on this principle, with a constitution that authorizes the Expediency Council to overrule the president and parliament, and the Supreme Leader to overrule everything else—including, presumably, the constitution.

Currently, the constitution spells out the succession process as follows: "In the event of the death, resignation, or dismissal of the leader, the [Assembly of Experts] shall take steps within the shortest possible time for the appointment of the new leader. Until the appointment of the new leader, a council consisting of the president, head of the judiciary, and a jurist from the Guardian Council, upon the decision of the nation's Expediency Council, shall temporarily take over all the duties of the Leader." If any member of this provisional leadership council is unable to fulfill his duties for whatever reason during the transitional period, the Expediency Council is authorized to replace him with another person using an internal majority vote.

Since the constitution is silent about how long the provisional council is permitted to operate, it could remain in power for quite some time, at least in theory. Yet failing to appoint a true successor would probably raise concerns about the regime's credibility and create room for a potential political crisis. More likely, then, the assembly would try to appoint a new Supreme Leader as quickly as possible, as in 1989. Yet the world has seen many "temporary" solutions that became long lasting, so a possibility exists that the provisional council will persist indefinitely.

The Expediency Council would play a major role in shaping that provisional body, especially if the president and the head of the judiciary are political enemies, as they are today. (President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Larijani brothers—Sadeq, head of the judiciary, and Ali, a speaker of parliament—detest each other and head the two main rival factions in Iranian politics.) It is therefore worth examining the council's makeup.

All Expediency Council members are either appointed by the Supreme Leader or hold official positions such as the presidency or membership on the Guardian Council. The chair is appointed by the Supreme Leader as well, and all members serve five-year terms. Khamenei's next opportunity to renew or alter Expediency Council appointments will be late February 2012, and considerable adjustments are a certainty. In particular, Mir Hossein Mousavi—a 2009 presidential candidate and opposition Green Movement leader who is now under house arrest—is unlikely to be reappointed. And Rafsanjani, who has led the council since 1999, is politically marginalized; his chances for reappointment as council head continue to shrink because he has avoided condemning the leaders of the 2009 protests and explicitly supporting Khamenei's recent domestic and foreign policies.²² Khamenei's decisions about the council may provide some evidence regarding his thoughts on the future of the regime's leadership.

For its part, the Assembly of Experts is composed of Shiite *mujtabids* who are short-listed by the Guardian Council and then elected by the people. According to the constitution, its role in the succession process is as follows:

The experts will review and consult among themselves concerning all the jurists possessing the qualifications specified in Articles 107 and 109. In the event they find one of them better versed in Islamic regulations, the subjects of Islamic jurisprudence, or political and social issues, or possessing general popularity or special prominence for any of the qualifications mentioned in Article 109, they shall elect him as the leader. Otherwise, in the absence of such superiority, they shall elect and declare one of them as the leader.

The Assembly of Experts election usually has the lowest voter turnout of all Iranian popular elections,²³ reflecting the people's low expectations regarding the body's ability to significantly influence Iranian politics. Assembly members, all of whom must be ayatollahs,²⁴ have never been able to fulfill their constitutional mandate to scrutinize Khamenei's actions or directly question him, primarily because the Supreme Leader has a dominant hand in choosing them via the Guardian Council's preliminary vetting of candidates.

The current eighty-six-member assembly, the fourth of its kind, is chaired by Ayatollah Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, an influential cleric who is utterly loyal to Khamenei. Other members of the board include former judiciary chiefs Muhammad Yazdi and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, current judiciary head Sadeq Larijani, former first deputy of the judiciary Sayyed Ebrahim Rais Assadati (known as Raissi), former minister of intelligence and attorney-general Qorban Ali Dorri Najaf Abadi, and Ahmad Khatami, one of the Friday prayer imams in Tehran.²⁵ All are faithful Khamenei trustees.

Rafsanjani chaired the assembly from 2007 to March 2011 following the death of Ali Meshkini. Given his criticism of the regime's reaction to the 2009 election crisis, however, he was replaced by Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani (b. 1931), with Khamenei's tacit approval. Rafsanjani's supporters in the assembly—including Hassan Rouhani, former head of the Supreme National Security Council, and Hassan Khomeini, Ayatollah Khomeini's grandson—have been completely sidelined and seem to have little chance of prevailing in the next election, scheduled for 2015. In short, Khamenei appears to have

full control over the assembly now. This situation is exacerbated by a legal framework that has placed the assembly exclusively in charge of modifying its own internal regulations.²⁶

As mentioned earlier, Articles 107 and 109 of the constitution task the assembly with forming a commission to investigate potential candidates for Supreme Leader and deliver a list of final candidates to the assembly. This commission currently consists of eleven principal and five alternate members, all of whom are ultraconservative and loyal to Khamenei.²⁷ Players outside Khamenei's circle seemingly have no significant role in preparing this list.

Although the Assembly of Experts will almost certainly be the body that nominally chooses Khamenei's successor, it is inconceivable that such a politically lightweight group would make the actual decision. This is especially true because the 1989 constitutional changes, under which the Supreme Leader was explicitly designated as a political figure rather than a senior cleric, have been implemented with a vengeance.

The IRGC Will Be a Key Actor

It is difficult to believe that Khamenei's appointment as Supreme Leader was a natural election by the Assembly of Experts. More likely, a handful of influential political elites chose him beforehand and then told assembly members to vote for him. At the time, political power was not concentrated in the hands of one person or group, requiring powerful factions to come to a consensus in order to appoint a new leader. The situation today is very different—the circle of succession decisionmakers will be much smaller.

For one thing, Khamenei has marginalized the first generation of revolutionary politicians, including Rafsanjani, former president Muhammad Khatami, and Mousavi. Those who launched the revolution had independent standing for many years, but Khamenei has refashioned the political spectrum by elevating a new generation of weak politicians who owe their credentials to him.

Second, as a consequence of this political transformation, the clergy no longer influences the country's management, greatly diminishing its ability to affect

the succession process. The regime has demystified the clergy by dividing them into "good" and "bad," marginalizing those clerics who showed potential for gaining actual religious power and making the clerical establishment economically and bureaucratically dependent on the government. The Islamic legitimacy of the regime's various activities has since become a subject of suspicion and questioning, and the principle of *velayat-e faqih* has lost its credibility even within the religious strata of society. As discussed previously, this principle can barely provide legitimacy to the position and authority of the ruling jurist. Increasingly, the clergy views the Supreme Leader position as military rather than one of autonomous clerical authority.

Third, the power of the president is under challenge. Apparently, Khamenei and the IRGC do not like to see power concentrated in the hands of one politician. Khamenei has already spoken publicly about changing the presidential election system to a parliamentary model in which the legislature chooses the executive instead of the people.²⁸ If that happens, the president would not be able to use his personal popularity to buttress his position, and parliament—guided by the Supreme Leader—would have even more control over him. This would reduce the prospect of the president becoming a power broker in the succession process.

Of course, an individual well versed in skillful political infighting, as Ahmadinejad has proved to be, could still use the presidency to establish himself as a force to be reckoned with. Yet the most likely scenario is that the IRGC will be the key institution in the succession process. The regime has gradually become more military than revolutionary in nature, relying on neither constitutional nor political institutions. Over the past twenty years, the IRGC has undergone major organizational and bureaucratic development and is now considered the country's most powerful institution. In 1989, power was mostly in the hands of civilians, and although Khomeini was officially commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he never did the job alone and always conceded authority to others. For its part, the IRGC was a revolutionary military force and did not have a major political or economic role. Today, however, Khamenei personally

runs the armed forces, including the regular military, police, and IRGC. He has allowed the Revolutionary Guard to enter politics and take over at least a third of the country's economy. Indeed, Khamenei is the most powerful individual in Iran in large part because of his reliance on the IRGC. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine that the next Supreme Leader will be chosen by the Assembly of Experts alone, without the IRGC's guidance or influence.

Another reason why the IRGC is likely to play a key role is that Khamenei's death may spark worries about popular unrest. Even before it forms a provisional leadership council or begins the process of appointing a new leader, the regime would need to apply tough security measures and suspend ordinary law to keep Iranians from seizing the opportunity to revolt.

Of course, the IRGC may not speak with one voice about succession when the time comes. The Revolutionary Guard is not only a military body, but also a politico-economic complex, and various factions inside it compete with each other and hold different interests in many sectors. The factions have no consistent leadership group independent from the Supreme Leader—Khamenei has full control over them and manages their factionalism. Yet in the absence of such a commander, the power balance within the military would surely change. And if Khamenei dies unexpectedly, it might not be easy for such a fragmented organization to reach a consensus on the most important issue in Iranian politics. In such situations, more radical groups often have a higher chance of success due to their susceptibility and willingness to use force and give priority to effectiveness rather than political legitimacy, with the result that Khamenei's passing may result in the government becoming even more militarized and radical.

In light of these factors, the regime's first challenge after Khamenei will be to create a united voice in the IRGC. The Revolutionary Guard is not ideologically monolithic, especially within the rank and file. Since Khamenei came to power, he has tried to marginalize the IRGC's leftist, pro-Montazeri factions in favor of officers close to him.²⁹ And whether or not each individual guardsman is loyal to Khamenei and the ideals of the Islamic Republic, they all generally view the

clergy as a fading sociopolitical force. In their eyes, the clergy is not as competent as they are in running the country. They also believe that they should be the regime's primary beneficiaries given how much they have sacrificed for the Islamic Republic compared to the clerics. Accordingly, the main question post-Khamenei will be how to distribute power (political, economic, and social) among influential IRGC commanders while keeping it from civilian politicians.

As for foreign policy in the wake of Khamenei's passing, some IRGC commanders—whether out of genuine belief or as leverage in their internal fights—will seek to reverse Iran's hostile stance toward the West and look for opportunities to change the government's current course on certain issues. Yet the regime's posture has been deeply entrenched by Khamenei, so outsiders must temper their hopes for major change after his death.

Regarding the process of actually choosing succession candidates, the separation of religious and political authority that began with Khamenei's appointment would make it easier for the IRGC to champion a low-level cleric if it so desired. Although Khamenei's heir would probably be under heavy IRGC control and hence have little power of his own (at least at first), he would still be the figure responsible for formally maintaining the Islamic Republic's legitimacy and divine authority. Accordingly, Khamenei and senior military leaders no doubt already have their lists of successors in hand. Rafsanjani stated that the Assembly of Experts has made a list of potential qualified candidates to replace Ayatollah Khamenei whenever necessary.³⁰

Obviously, no such lists will be publicized before Khamenei actually leaves the scene, but speculation about who will replace him is nevertheless inevitable. Some of the more prominent names that have been cited include the following, several of which were mentioned earlier in this paper:

- Khamenei's second son and favored candidate Mojtaba (b. 1969);
- Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi (b. 1948), former judiciary chief and Guardian Council member, currently on the Expediency Council and Assembly of Experts;

- Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi (b. 1934), an extremist cleric who believes that democracy and Islam are incompatible;³¹
- Muhammad Yazdi (b. 1931), former judiciary chief and head of the Qom seminary's Association of Professors (Jameh-e-ye Modarresin-e Howzeh-ye Elmiyeh-ye Qom);
- Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani (b. 1931), head of both the Assembly of Experts and the Association of Tehran's Militant Clergy.

Among these five prospects, only Hashemi Shahroudi meets the traditional criteria for an ayatollah. An established jurist who has issued fatwas, Shahroudi has published a book on legal opinion (*resaleh-ye amaliyeh*, usually authored only by a grand ayatollah as a guide for his followers), and opened offices as a *marja* in Qom and Najaf.³² On August 15, 2011, Khamenei also appointed him as head of the "Supreme Board of Arbitration and Adjustment of Relations among the Three Branches of Government" following a dispute among Ahmadinejad, the judiciary, and parliament.³³ Some experts interpreted the creation of this board—which was both unprecedented and unconstitutional—as evidence that Khamenei is warming Shahroudi up to succeed him.

Yet Shahroudi would have difficulty becoming the next Supreme Leader for several reasons. He is unpopular, though that is true of most of the potential candidates. More important, he is seen as a hypocrite who in the first decade of the Islamic Republic claimed to be an Iraqi citizen and served first as head, then as spokesman, of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). He speaks Persian with an Arabic accent and, unlike Khamenei, is not an eloquent orator. And he did not become close to the government's leadership until after Khomeini died. His relationship with the IRGC is unclear, though he was close to some IRGC elements who dealt with SCIRI's Badr Brigades in the 1980s.

Regardless of which candidate comes out on top, those who have power now will likely keep it after Khamenei's death. The IRGC—which controls the

military, the nuclear program, and a major portion of Iran's economy—will probably have the biggest say in appointing the next Supreme Leader. At the same time, it may not be easy for the various factions inside the IRGC to agree. And if a succession crisis does emerge, the Islamic Republic would be much more vulnerable than it was in 1989. By micromanaging politics and suppressing the country's reformist faction, Khamenei has made the circles of power in Iran much tighter. As a result, many factions are unlikely to respect a decision made at a time of crisis by the very body formally entrusted with determining his successor, the marginalized Assembly of Experts.

The Leader Will Not Start Out Being Supreme

Understanding the succession process means examining not only the "how" and "who," but also the "what"—that is, what role the successor will play. Khamenei has played a very different role than Khomeini, and the next Supreme Leader will likely differ as well.

For one thing, IRGC leaders likely hope to avoid choosing a highly influential ayatollah as successor. Learning from the past two decades, they might prefer to appoint a weak, ailing figure in order to justify the constitutionality of their own power. The March 2011 removal of the iconic Rafsanjani as head of the Assembly of Experts and his replacement by Mahdavi Kani is the IRGC's most likely model for determining a new Supreme Leader. Similarly, the Iranian public would be most unhappy with the appointment of a powerful leader bent on imitating Khamenei's toughness and autocratic tendencies.

Yet the question is whether the new Supreme Leader will remain as weak as he is likely to be when first assuming office. When Khamenei was appointed in 1989, he was by no means the "Supreme Leader," as he insists on being called now. Instead, he was more of a nominal leader, and his power and influence took time to develop. His successor will likely be just as weak at first and will have to work hard to gain the kind of power Khamenei has at present.

During the first succession, the other main candidate besides Khamenei was Rafsanjani, the person

closest to Khomeini, with political authority and influence that went beyond his official position. As Khomeini's confidant, he was recognized by both the left and right wings as a smart politician and talented manager. Presumably, he was regarded as too powerful to become Supreme Leader. Instead, he set his sights on the executive branch after the revised constitution eliminated the position of prime minister and concentrated power in the president's hands.

In contrast, Khamenei was seen as a respectable figure and nothing more—a good-looking, black-turbaned descendent of the Prophet and former president who was not powerful enough to have a specific agenda for himself or dominate other factions. This calculation proved to be wrong, of course, but at the time it seemed to make sense.

Since Khamenei was a relatively low-level cleric—not even a *mujtahid*, let alone a grand ayatollah—his authority was indeed weak at first. His appointment entailed an obvious separation of religious and political authority, which complicated the Islamic Republic's ideology. The possibility of appointing a grand ayatollah such as Muhammad Reza Golpayegani as Supreme Leader had been ruled out, in part because Iranian leaders believed that bringing him to power would have impeded postwar reconstruction and engagement with the rest of the world.³⁴ Khomeini's son Ahmad, though ambitious, lacked religious credentials; he was reluctant to become a cleric, doing so only because his father forced him, and he did not study much in the seminary. Furthermore, his succession did not make sense in a country that had gone through a revolution to abolish monarchic inheritance of power.

One key to Khamenei's ascension from this inauspicious start was his relative youth. Born in 1939, he was just short of fifty when he assumed office after Khomeini's death in June 1989. Compared to other prominent figures—including his predecessor (who came to power when he was seventy-seven), revolutionary founders such as Montazeri (b. 1923) and Rafsanjani (b. 1934), and other "sources of emulation" (*marja-e taqlid*) in the Shiite world such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (b. 1930)—Khamenei was young.

He was also aware of the essential differences in his circumstances compared to Khomeini, who had used his charisma and authority to exercise power without an established bureaucracy. As mentioned before, the revised constitution gave much more authority to the executive branch, allowing Rafsanjani to exert more power than past presidents. Accordingly, Khamenei sought to expand his authority at Rafsanjani's expense. From the outset, he created a bureaucracy through which to maintain power, and this apparatus eventually grew to colossal proportions.

One important part of this effort involved taking control of existing agencies. In particular, Khamenei overcame his lowly standing among clerics and veteran regime officials by using his connections in the Ministry of Intelligence and IRGC. While serving as president during the Iran-Iraq War, he had developed ties with these institutions, which were expanding their authority beyond the security sphere and becoming involved in economic activities as well.³⁵ As the war ended and commanders returned to their cities, Khamenei began to create a power base outside conventional political institutions. He recruited young, loyal politicians by bringing military commanders and intelligence agents into the political arena. Among the figures from Khamenei's circle who emerged to prominence were Majlis speaker Ali Larijani, Supreme Council for National Security chief Said Jalili, joint forces commander Hassan Firouzabadi, state radio and television chief Ezzatollah Zarghami, and the head of the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled, Muhammad Forouzandeh. Such appointments converted the IRGC and other organizations into economic-political-military-intelligence conglomerations answerable only to Khamenei.

By shepherding a new generation of politicians and gradually marginalizing those veteran regime officials unwilling to work for him, Khamenei concentrated Iran's power centers under his authority. He became de facto head of all three branches of government, took charge of state media, and assumed the post of commander-in-chief of the police, army, and IRGC. In the process, he transformed the clerical establishment from a traditional religious institution into an ideological

apparatus and government proxy. He also came to control the country's most lucrative institutions (e.g., the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad and the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled), using the funds they generate to advance his agenda both inside Iran and abroad, building dozens of centers, foundations, and Islamic banks with political, cultural, social, and economic missions.

In addition to taking over existing agencies, Khamenei built up his personal office to unprecedented proportions. Traditionally, the head of a religious authority's office is either a son or another prominent cleric; for example, Khomeini worked from his home, receiving information and issuing orders primarily through his son Ahmad. In contrast, Khamenei created an extensive bureaucracy and transformed the "house of the leader" into a vast, sophisticated institution with thousands of employees working in different departments. Since his sons were too young and prominent clerics were unwilling to take the position, Khamenei chose the low-ranking cleric Muhammad Muhammadi Golpayegani (not to be confused with the prominent Sayyed Muhammad Reza Moussavi Golpayegani, who is no relation) to lead his office.³⁶ Not surprisingly, Golpayegani also had a strong intelligence background. He was one of the founders of Iran's main intelligence agency and had served, among other positions, as the intelligence minister's deputy on parliamentary affairs under Khomeini.

Khamenei also reached into the intelligence services for other significant appointments in his office. For example, he selected Asghar Mir Hejazi, another cofounder of the intelligence service, as head of his personal intelligence department. Mir Hejazi began his career as a commander in the Committee of the Islamic Revolution, a post-1979 military organization parallel to the police that was later disbanded. He also served as a deputy for international affairs in the Intelligence Ministry before moving to Khamenei's office. Golpayegani and Mir Hejazi's appointments were a significant departure from Khomeini's practice in that both men were low-level clerics who did not enter politics directly from the seminary.

Over the years, Khamenei has turned the "house of the leader" into a focal point of power. It is not only the de facto headquarters of Iran's armed forces, but also the actual headquarters of the Intelligence Ministry, the coordinator of the three branches of government, and the manager of economic matters. It also oversees the the Leader Army (*sepah-e vali-e Amr*), a special military unit of 11,000 soldiers supervised by the IRGC and responsible for the security of Khamenei's office.

To direct foreign policy, Khamenei created new committees and entities under his control, relegating the Foreign Ministry to mostly administrative issues. These offices also drew on Khamenei's military connections. For example, the Military Advisors Center consists of high-ranking Revolutionary Guard and army veterans such as former IRGC commander-in-chief Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, former army commander-in-chief Gen. Ali Shahbazi, and former police chief Hedayat Lotfian. The Supreme Council for National Security plays an important role as well, and although its secretary is formally appointed by the president, in reality he is chosen by the Supreme Leader. Khamenei also has other trusted foreign policy advisors, most notably Ali Akbar Velayati, who served sixteen years as foreign minister. In 1982, Velayati was then president Khamenei's first choice for prime minister, but he failed to gain parliamentary approval and instead became foreign minister under Mir Hossein Mousavi.

Since the fraudulent 2009 presidential election, Khamenei has revealed his micromanagerial style even more than before, cementing his office's status as the highest authority on intelligence, military, nuclear, judicial, and clerical issues. Yet because he became strong only by empowering the IRGC, one could also say that the Revolutionary Guard is conducting most of its political and strategic affairs through his office; in other words, in order to run his office, Khamenei uses mostly IRGC members. His office is the de facto headquarters of the government as well as the armed forces. Moreover, despite his carefully constructed set of new institutions, much of his rule depends on individual trusted advisors and key people whom he has appointed to a host of positions. These individuals

may not be as deferential to his successor. Nor is it obvious that the institutions Khamenei created will continue to wield the same kind of power they do today. And if his successor is already at an advanced age upon assuming office, he may not have the luxury that Khamenei had of being able to bide his time while slowly gathering power.

More broadly, the very nature of the Supreme Leader's role in post-Khamenei Iran is uncertain. In recent years, religious and intellectual delegitimization of the "absolute authority of the jurispudent" (*velayat-e motlaqeh-ye faqih*) has raised questions about the future role of this institution. And as described previously, the IRGC's sway over the country's most significant political positions and financial resources reveals a shift in the regime's nature—from a revolutionary government to a military state in which clerics have little room to exert their religious authority.

Many Iranians are also beginning to question a constitution that guarantees perpetual conflict between positions with democratic legitimacy and positions with divine legitimacy but zero accountability before the people. Mousavi and other opposition leaders have repeatedly stated that the constitution is imperfect and may need to change, implicitly targeting the Supreme Leader's position and authority. Although Khamenei's appointment was surprising to the people and shocking to the clergy, the regime managed to establish him as Supreme Leader in part by exploiting the emotional atmosphere created after a long, exhausting war and the death of a charismatic leader whose funeral attracted millions of followers. Today, particularly after the rigged 2009 election, it would be difficult to introduce a leader whose background and record would not be widely disputed.

Policy Implications

The nature of the Islamic Republic's leadership after Khamenei's passing is the gravest issue in the future of Iranian politics. Given the regime's habit of manipulating elections and weakening the parliament, presidency, and other democratic institutions, no political position is as important as that of Supreme Leader. Khamenei's

death, even if followed by a peaceful transition of power, will in all likelihood push the regime into a new era. Although Ayatollah Khomeini's death enabled technocrats to assume executive power for several years, the IRGC under Khamenei's leadership gradually pushed them out of government. The next succession will no doubt enable the IRGC and the military and security apparatus in general to extend their dominance over the regime as a whole. If the IRGC remains united despite the conflicting interests of its various factions, post-Khamenei Iran will maintain a democratic facade but move further toward a de facto military regime—one that could survive as long as it avoids both war and revolution. Under such a regime, the Supreme Leader would hold a ceremonial position and, for the most part, be instructed by the IRGC. Therefore, the future of *velayat-e faqih* and the Islamic Republic's founding identity depends on the IRGC's actions post-Khamenei.

As for the regime's foreign policy, the past three decades have established a pattern among Iranian leaders: those who hold the most power are anti-American, and those who lose power tend to become pro-Western. Even Khamenei was not seen as a radical anti-American politician before assuming the office of Supreme Leader—his leftist rivals were the ones who seized the U.S. embassy in 1979 and led the country's anti-American discourse. Yet because he was relatively weak in his first years of leadership, he hijacked that discourse and became even more anti-American than the leftists, who gradually abandoned that outlook and became reformists.

Since the next Supreme Leader will likely hold a ceremonial position, the question of whether he would be willing to engage with the West is not especially important. The real question is whether the IRGC would refashion Iranian politics by negotiating with the United States and dropping its defiant attitude. Mounting pressure over the regime's nuclear policies is seriously harming the country's economy, and the IRGC would likely need to take action on this issue post-Khamenei in order to strengthen its position. Opening up to the West and, especially, the United States would help military leaders gain domestic popularity and international legitimacy while also restoring

the broken economy. Yet it is unclear whether the IRGC would be prepared to roll back Iran's nuclear progress to reach this goal.

Indeed, the Revolutionary Guard's future nuclear policy may depend on when Khamenei dies and whether the regime has achieved a nuclear weapons capability by that time. If the IRGC inherits a regime with that capability, it might see an opening to the West as a sign of weakness or threatening to the country. If the IRGC inherits an Iran without a nuclear weapons capability, the first priority of the IRGC would be establishing full political and economic control of the country rather than defying Israel or America. Therefore it is crucial that the international community not let Iran develop a nuclear bomb, because a nuclear Iran under a military government might be more dangerous than a nuclear government under Khamenei: a military government cares less about political legitimacy than about power and effectiveness and would not hesitate to use force if necessary.

Whatever the case, the IRGC's main priority during a transition would likely center on consolidating power in its hands, and acute confrontation with the West would make that goal more difficult. The IRGC seems well aware of the falseness behind the "rally 'round the flag" assumption—the notion that provoking armed conflict with Israel and the United States would inspire the Iranian people to express nationalist solidarity with the government. In recent discussions of potential military action against their country, several prominent Iranian intellectuals expressed concern but at the same time explicitly stated that such action would not encourage the people to stand on the regime's side.³⁷

In light of these considerations, the Supreme Leader's death could present a unique opportunity for the United States to establish a new relationship with Iran, spurring the IRGC to refashion the regime's hostile foreign policy. Even if it could not convince post-Khamenei Tehran to open up to the United States, Washington could at least ensure that the IRGC's ambitions do not jeopardize the interests of other countries in the region.

Toward that end, it is crucial that the United States and its European partners begin establishing lines of communication with the IRGC's various factions sooner rather than later, since these factions represent Iran's future leadership. Reaching Ayatollah Khamenei is not useful anymore, since changing his mindset seems impossible. The current, defiant nuclear policy with which Khamenei has identified himself can change only if he dies or becomes politically weak. Unlike his predecessor, he is not able to publicly announce that he would "drink the glass of poison" (an expression Khomeini used when he accepted the U.S. ceasefire resolution to end the Iran-Iraq War). If Khamenei were to give up, he would face a great and even unbearable political crisis that could cost him his position. Hence, current nuclear policy has become a matter of life and death for him, so much so that only a real threat of imminent military action might change his mind. Nothing else would stop him from acquiring a nuclear bomb.

In the end, what matters most now is to reach the future leaders of the Islamic Republic within the IRGC. If such communication were successful, it could even afford the Guards enough confidence to challenge Khamenei's uncompromising policies while he is still alive.

Notes

1. Despite contrary analysis from some specialists on the IRGC (e.g., American Enterprise Institute fellow Ali Alfoneh), the author has not seen any hard evidence of autonomy within the Revolutionary Guard. In fact, Khamenei's regular cycle of changing IRGC divisional commanders proves that he is in full control. Moreover, the political views expressed by Khamenei's representative to the Guard (currently Ali Saidi) are in line with those of IRGC chief Mohammad Jafari and other high-ranking officers. For example, see Saidi's view on the coming parliamentary elections at http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/12/111226_110_saidi_sepah_majlis9th.shtml. Similarly, political statements by top IRGC commanders have always been supportive of Khamenei's political tendencies. For instance, see Jafari's remarks on how the Supreme Leader's "smart planning" caused reformists to fail: "Commander of IRGC: Khamenei's Cleverness Made Reformists Fail," BBC Persian website, January 2, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/01/120102_123_jafari_sepah_khatami_hashemi_rafsanjani_reformist_election_majlis09th.shtml.
2. Regarding the interaction between religious institutions and the regime, see Mehdi Khalaji, "Iran's Regime of Religion," *Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 1 (Fall–Winter 2011), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1783>.
3. On Khamenei's (or any Supreme Leader's) authority and the significance of his views on regime interests compared to the dictates of the constitution, ordinary law, and Islamic law, see Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji, *Nuclear Fatwa: Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy*, Policy Focus 115 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=354>.
4. On July 15, 1985, the Assembly of Experts passed a law tasking itself with appointing a successor while the Supreme Leader is alive in order to prevent a power vacuum in the event of his death. Yet the current assembly does not seem to believe it is obligated to respect this law. See Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Omid va Delvapas*, Khaterat-e Sale 1364 (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 1387), p. 189.
5. In an open letter to Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri in 1989, Ahmad Khomeini mentioned that he had proposed Montazeri's succession to his father after the latter's heart surgery years earlier, though only within his own circle, not publicly. The long letter was published as a pamphlet and distributed nationwide soon after Khomeini dismissed Montazeri as his successor (a sequence of events discussed later in this section). Titled "The Letter of Grievance" ("Ranj Nameh"), the pamphlet was intended to justify both the elder Khomeini's decision to dismiss Montazeri and Ahmad's own role in the process. The text is available on various websites, including that of Fars News Agency: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8801080174>.
6. In a March 10, 1982, letter to members of parliament, Golpayegani asked lawmakers to adhere to sharia and not overrule it for any reason, including "necessity" or regime interests. He also criticized those who believed that sharia was not compatible with the requirements of modern governance. See Said Hajjarian, *Az Shahed-e Qodsi ta Shahed-e Bazari* (Tehran: Tarhe No, 1380), pp. 120–122. In 1980, in order to address pressure from traditionalists concerned about the Islamic legitimacy of the legislative process, Khomeini appointed Lotfollah Safi Golpayegani—Muhammad Reza's son-in-law and one of the most conservative clerics in Qom, the center of Iran's religious establishment—as a member of the Guardian Council. Safi served as secretary of the council for eight years and occasionally sent Khomeini letters objecting to his decisions (e.g., *Az Shahed-e Qodsi*, pp. 114–115).
7. For example, Khomeini did not issue a definitive fatwa on executing people for certain crimes, but Montazeri did. Ayatollah Abdul Karim Mousavi Ardebili sent Khomeini a letter asking him to permit the judiciary to act upon Montazeri's fatwa so they could religiously justify the execution of accused prisoners; Khomeini assented. For other key letters, see Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Defa va Siasat*, Karnameh va Khaterat 1366, be ehtemam-e Alireza Hashemi (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 1389), p. 698.
8. Despite giving tremendous and broad authority to the ruling jurist, Montazeri limited the Supreme Leader's authority to the framework of Islamic law. But Khomeini's interpretation of *velayat-e faqih* went beyond sharia relying more on the ruling jurist's understanding of regime interests, even when they contradicted Islamic law or the constitution. In other words, Montazeri's theory of *velayat-e faqih* is constrained by sharia, while Khomeini's theory is absolute. This difference exists because Montazeri's approach was legal, while Khomeini used the term velayat as it is perceived in Islamic mysticism (erfan). Montazeri revised his theory of *velayat-e faqih* after he was dismissed as Khomeini's successor.

9. See Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Omid va Delvapasi*, p. 335.
10. Ali Shariati was an Islamic revolutionary author who was widely read by youths before 1979. His ideological interpretation of Shiite mythology, which was influenced by Russian Marxism, was considered heretical by traditional clerics. For an intellectual biography of Shariati, see Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000).
11. *Eternal Martyr* is a modern interpretation of the passion of Hossein, the third Shiite Imam. In Salehi's view, Hossein did not leave Medina just to be killed by Yazid's army. He wanted to create an Islamic government in Kufa, but was stopped in Karbala. Clerics consider this interpretation heretical because Salehi implicitly assumes that the imam was not aware of his destiny, while orthodox Shiites believe that any great Shiite imam is both infallible and prescient. This was among the first attempts to understand the story of Hossein by historical methodology rather than theological dogma. On the significance of the book, see Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 278–284.
12. The cleric Sayyed Sadeq Rouhani was put under house arrest because of his opposition to appointing Montazeri as Khomeini's successor (see *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, p. 346). And Rafsanjani's diaries suggest that regime leaders were initially reluctant to publicize their decision about Montazeri mainly out of fear of the clerics' reaction (*ibid.*, p. 318).
13. Shams Abadi, one of the highest-ranking clerics in Isfahan, was killed on April 7, 1976. An outspoken traditionalist cleric, he had opposed the revolutionary fervor of young pro-Khomeini clerics and did not hesitate to publicly criticize both *Eternal Martyr* and those who endorsed the book, including Montazeri. For the government's account of the murder case, see Muhammadi Rey Shahri, *Khatereh-ha*, 4th ed., vol. 4 (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1388), pp. 329–333. The attribution of Shams Abadi's murder to followers of Montazeri greatly tarnished the latter's reputation among conservative clerics who were not passionately pro-Khomeini. After the revolution, Salehi Najaf Abadi's course in Shiite jurisprudence took place in Montazeri's *hosseiniyeh* (religious center). In his 1989 "Letter of Grievance," Ahmad Khomeini, Khomeini's son, said that when Montazeri was asked to not permit the author of *Eternal Martyr* to use Montazeri's *hosseiniyeh* for his courses, Montazeri did not comply. This shows that Khomeini believed that for Montazeri to be prepared for succession, he would need to stay away from Salehi Najaf Abadi.
14. Mehdi Hashemi was tasked by Montazeri with running the Liberation Movements Unit. See Hashemi's group chart in Muhammadi Rey Shahri, *Khatereh-ha*, pp. 345–349.
15. In summer 1979, Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani—a conservative cleric who now heads the Assembly of Experts—ordered the younger Montazeri's arrest for radical acts that ignored both the law and regime interests, as reported in the July 7, 1979, edition of *Kayhan* newspaper.
16. At least this is what pro-Khomeini elements then believed. For example, Mojtaba Zonnour, former commander of the Imam Sadeq Brigade (a clerical-military unit), gave an interview on how Montazeri's views on war differed from Khomeini's; see <http://www.ayandenews.com/news/37359>.
17. In his diaries, Rafsanjani repeatedly mentions Montazeri's critique of the government's economic and military agenda. One of the subjects the two men argued about was building metro rails in Tehran. Rafsanjani eventually succeeded in convincing Montazeri of the need for such development. See *Omid va Delvapasi*, pp. 396, 431.
18. Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Mémoire* (Paris: Entesharat-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 2001) p. 727.
19. During the past two decades, Montazeri became courageously self-critical and an exceptional personality among high-ranking ayatollahs. He admitted that he had made colossal mistakes in several cases, including his support of the U.S. embassy seizure by pro-Khomeini students and his sanction of the Islamic Republic's revolutionary policies, both domestic and foreign. He publically opposed the production of weapons of mass destruction, recognized citizenship rights of Bahais, and referred to the Islamic Republic as "neither Islamic nor republic but a military government." In an interview by his son Said, he provided a detailed explanation of his points of view; entitled "Self Criticism," it was published posthumously and is available online at http://www.amontazeri.com/Farsi/article_read.asp?id=336.
20. Interestingly, while members of the Assembly of Experts must be *mujtahids* (Shiite jurists), there is no law regarding the qualifications of those assigned to revise the constitution. Therefore, Khomeini filled most of the constitutional council with his favored officials; *ijtehad*, or being an ayatollah or even a cleric, was not a requirement for being a member in that group. A *mujtahid* is a cleric who has an *ijtehad* certificate, ostensibly understands religious texts autonomously, and can be called an ayatollah. If he succeeds in attracting followers, he is called a grand ayatollah. All Shiite worshippers have a religious duty to follow a *mujtahid* if they are not *mujtahids* themselves. Yet a *mujtahid* is not allowed to follow other *mujtahids* on religious matters.

21. Of the seventy-four members of the Assembly of Experts who attended that emergency meeting, sixty voted for Khamenei.
22. On February 27, 2007, Khamenei appointed the following members to the Expediency Council: Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ahmad Jannati, Vaez Tabasi, Amini Najaf Abadi, Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, Emami Kashani, Movahhedi Kermani, Hassan Habibi, Mir Hossein Mousavi, Ali Akbar Velayati, Dorri Najaf Abadi, Muhammadi Rey Shahri, Hassan Sanei, Hassan Rouhani, Habib Allah Asghar Oladi, Ali Larijani, Muhammad Reza Bahonar, Mostafa Mir Salim, Tavassoli Mahallati, Morteza Nabavi, Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, Hassan Firouzabadi, Gholam Reza Aqa Zadeh, Bijan Namdar Zanganeh, Mohsen Rezaii, Hossein Mozaffar, Muhammad Hashemi, Muhammad Reza Aref, Muhammad Javad Irvani, Parviz Davoudi, Qolam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei, Ali Aqa Muhammadi, Muhammad Forouzandeh, Davoud Danesh Jafari. Later, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi was appointed after member Tavassoli Mahallati passed away. The council also includes, by virtue of their official positions, several nonappointed members: the heads of the three branches of government, six jurist members from the Guardian Council, cabinet ministers who deal with specific issues discussed in various Expediency Council sessions, and the heads of parliamentary commissions responsible for such issues. See <http://maslahat.ir/DocLib2/Irec%20Pillars/Irec%20council.aspx>.
23. For analysis on these participation rates, see Yaser Moradi, "Hozour-e Sinusi," *Hamshahri*, June 1, 2006, <http://hamshahrionline.ir/hamnews/1385/850311/world/siasatw.htm>.
24. For more on the qualifications of assembly members, see *Porsesh-ha va Pasokh-ha-I Darbareh-ye Majlis-e Khorbregan-e Rabbari* (Qom: Dabir Khaneh-ye Majlis-e Khebragan-e Rahbari, 1385), pp. 63–76.
25. See official website of the Assembly of Experts, <http://www.majlesekhobregan.ir/FA/HeyatRaese.html>.
26. *Porsesh-ha va Pasokh-ha-I*, p. 82.
27. The principal members are Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, Qorban Ali Dorri Najaf Abadi, Morteza Moqtadai, Muhammad Yazdi, Abul Qasem Wafi, Abdunnabi Namazi, Mohyeddin Haeri Shirazi, Mohsen Mujtahid Shabestari, Youssef Tabatabai Nejad, Ali Shafii, and Assadollah Imani. The alternates are Gholam Ali Naim Abadi, Abbas Kabi, Abul Hassan Mahdavi, Reza Ramazani, and Hassan Taheri Khorram Abadi.
28. For the full text of his October 16, 2011, speech, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=17597>. The official English translation is available online at http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1577&Itemid=4.
29. For more on IRGC factionalism, see the letter sent by a retired guardsman to Muhammad Nourizad, a trusted Khamenei supporter who defected to the opposition and was imprisoned after the disputed 2009 election, at <http://nurizad.info/index.php/nurizad/17214>. See also this report on Hossein Alai's controversy: Hossein Bastani, "Did Hossein Alai Give Up in His Criticism of the Supreme Leader?" (January 16, 2012), http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/01/120116_bastani_alaei_critics.shtml. Mr. Alai is the founder of the IRGC Navy and was its first commander during the Iran-Iraq War. In an article published in the *Ettelaat* newspaper he compares the Supreme Leader's uncompromising attitude toward the opposition to that of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in his last year.
30. Several lists have been created by a number of power centers. The Assembly of Experts' list may overlap in some cases, but the IRGC list would probably be much closer to Khamenei's list. See Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Azad Andishi*, <http://www.hashemirafsanjani.ir/?type=static&lang=1&cid=172>
31. Mesbah-Yazdi is known within the clerical establishment as an untrustworthy hardliner and has been isolated for many reasons, including an aggressive attitude toward his critics. Recently, however, he created a political group called "Constancy Front" (Jebheh-ye Paydari) to introduce his own candidates for the March 2012 parliamentary elections—a direct challenge to the political groups formed by mainstream conservatives. Ali Motahhari—a member of parliament, brother-in-law to Majlis speaker Ali Larijani and judiciary chief Sadeq Larijani, and the son of Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, a prominent Khomeini disciple and revolutionary ideologue—has said that if members of Constancy Front take over the legislature, "the regime and revolution will be destroyed quickly." He added, "This group's reading of *velayat-e faqih* is narrow-minded and uncompromising." See "A Member of Majlis's Warning about the Future of the Political Regime in Iran," BBC Persian, December 28, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/12/111219_123_majlis9th_motahhari_paydari_fall.shtml.
32. See <http://hashemishahroudi.org/beta/index.php/pages/post/49/tasisdaftar>.
33. For the full text of Khamenei's appointment letter, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=16782>.
34. *Porsesh-ha va Pasokh-ha-I*, p. 106.
35. For example, Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, has explained how Khamenei first established a relationship with him during the war. Ali Alfoneh, "Iran's Secret Network," *Middle Eastern Outlook*, March 3, 2011, <http://www.aei.org/article/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/middle-east-and-north-africa/irans-secret-network>.

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36. Later, Khamenei's elder daughter Bushra married Golpayegani's son Muhammad Javad Muhammadi Muhammadi.
 37. See, for example, Abdulkarim Soroush's open letter to Ayatollah Khamenei, December 22, 2011, http://www.drSORoush.com/Persian/By_DrSoroush/P-NWS-13901001-baghbanaZeKhazanbBiKhabaratMibinam.html. See also the following two articles by Iranian sociologists: Mehrdad Darvishpoor, "In Case of Military Action against Iran, We Will Not Stand on Government's Side," *Iran Tribune*, January 7, 2012, <http://www.iran-tribune.com/2009-02-16-23-03-32/2009-03-21-23-49-15/16164-2012-01-07-03-40-37> and Majid Muhammadi, "They Would Not React," Gooya.com, December 20, 2011, <http://news.gooya.com/politics/archives/2011/12/133191.php>.

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