After Khamenei: Who Will Succeed Iran’s Supreme Leader?

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Abstract: Since succeeding the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Ali Khamenei has striven to make himself indispensable to the fate of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran. However, the measures Khamenei has taken to secure his power have left his succession in doubt, with no consensus heir. The lack of clear successors among the clergy, weakness of the government institutions, and concerns about regime strength could lead to instability and the potential for an Islamic Revolution Guard Corps coup.

The fraudulent nature of the 2009 Iranian Presidential election and the despotic character of Iran’s rulers revealed through violent post-election repression have renewed Western interest in the functioning of the Iranian regime. Although the Iranian President is nominally the head of government, and is thus often highlighted in the Western press, it is the Supreme Leader who holds real power in the Islamist system. Since the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, there have been only two individuals to hold this position. The father of the Islamist Revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ruled as Supreme Leader for the first decade of the regime. He was succeeded upon his death in 1989 by his long-time follower, former President Ali Khamenei. While Khamenei, only a mid-level cleric at the time, lacked the religious credentials to become Supreme Leader under Khomeini’s Islamist philosophy, expediency trumped ideological consistency and the politically savvy Khamenei was able to obtain power. Seen at the time as one who lacked the charisma of Khomeini and would thus serve as a figurehead who would seek counsel and consensus among the various senior clerics, Khamenei spent the 1990s building his own base.

Over the last decade, Khamenei has established himself as the indispensable individual, balancing would-be competitors to prevent political challenges, institutionalizing the clergy to minimize the voice of traditional quietist clerics, and exercising unparalleled economic influence via a host of
pseudo-state entities. As is common in autocratic regimes where authority is heavily concentrated in a single person, Khamenei has prevented anyone else from developing a base sufficient to pose a challenge. Likewise, he has steadfastly avoided grooming an heir. Accordingly, there is great uncertainty as to who will follow the 72-year old Khamenei. Will it be a single cleric, and if so, how can this cleric realistically pull together the broad support necessary among the various clerical factions? Will the clerical infighting result in a panel of senior clerics who share authority? Will the lack of a consensus candidate generate systemic reform limiting the power of the Supreme Leader? Will the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) claim power in the name of the Islamic Revolution? These questions are vitally important as the international community struggles to develop a strategy to deal with an autocratic Iranian regime on the precipice of developing nuclear weapons capability. Thus, this article explains the power of the Supreme Leader, the formal procedure for his selection, and the circumstances of Khamenei’s rise to power, before addressing the scenarios regarding succession.

**What Power Does the Supreme Leader Wield?**

Under the Islamist system in Iran, the Supreme Leader is invested with almost limitless power, although, theoretically, he rules not according to his own volition, but pursuant to the interests of Islam. Thus, according to regime proponents, the Supreme Leader is not a dictator, but is instead the exponent of God’s law. Ayatollah Khomeini’s personal stature and charisma were key factors in creating the position of Supreme Leader. So revered was Ayatollah Khomeini that establishing constraints on the power of the Supreme Leader in the Islamist Constitution was unthinkable. Having ousted the wildly unpopular Shah, different segments of the Iranian people came together behind Khomeini, with each group convincing itself that he would further their particular interests. Although many would come to regret their support, his initial popularity among the masses was unprecedented. Khomeini readily accepted leadership, believing himself, in the words of one analyst “so closely identified with God...that he...could function as a virtually divine lawgiver.” While his successor, Ali Khamenei, does not enjoy nearly the same level of respect, the office he holds retains its Khomeini-inspired power.

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1 Since the occultation of the Twelfth Imam in the ninth century, Shia clerics traditionally adopted a position avoiding official political involvement as any government other than that headed by the Imams was seen as illegitimate. Known as quietism, this position was explicitly rejected by Khomeini, who insisted that it was a clerical duty to oversee the government and established the Islamist regime in Iran on this foundation.


The Supreme Leader is constitutionally empowered to set forth the general policies of the state, supervise the execution of those policies, command the armed forces of the state, declare war and peace, determine the suitability of the President, and appoint and dismiss key officials including the supreme judicial authority, the various military commanders, members of various governmental bodies, and the head of the state media. However, as his authority is said to stem from no less than God, it clearly transcends those powers explicitly provided in the Constitution. While the Constitution provides for a variety of governmental institutions, including the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council, the Assembly of Experts, the Supreme National Security Council, the legislature, and the presidency, the Supreme Leader dominates each of these entities. Either directly or indirectly, the Supreme Leader appoints or oversees the appointment of individuals to each of these bodies and offices.

The Supreme Leader may solicit advice and permit debate among these subordinates, but as appointees of the Supreme Leader, they already reflect his policy preferences. By way of illustration, the Supreme Leader directly appoints six of the twelve clerics who constitute the Guardian Council, while the other six are nominated by the head of Iran’s judiciary (who is appointed by the Supreme Leader) and approved by the legislative assembly (Majlis). However, as the Guardian Council determines who may run for the Majlis, regularly disqualifying hundreds of potential candidates based on insufficiently Islamic character, this theoretical check on the Supreme Leader’s power of requiring Majlis approval of half of the Guardian Council is meaningless. Along with controlling who may run for office, the Guardian Council is also empowered to review and veto nearly all government activities. Article 4 of the Iranian Constitution declares that “All civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the Constitution as well as to all other laws and regulations and the [members] of the Guardian Council are judges in this matter.”

The Council is even empowered to exercise judicial review as it is explicitly given authority to interpret the Constitution. As the Council operates

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4 Article 110, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
5 Article 91, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
6 Article 4, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
7 Even when the Guardian Council permitted reformists to run for office, the conservatives were still able to prevent any real reform. By one account, the Council rejected ninety percent of the legislation proposed by reformists in the Majlis of the late 1990s. Katajun Amirpur, “The Future of Iran’s Reform Movement,” in Iranian Challenges, ed. Walter Posch (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2006), p. 31.
8 Article 98, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
by simple majority vote, the Supreme Leader’s direct appointment of half the Council and indirect control of the other half provide him with one of several means of exercising autocratic power behind the façade of republicanism. As if this institutional arrangement was not enough, the inferiority of the government relative to the Supreme Leader is expressly set forth in Article 57 of the Iranian Constitution, which holds that the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the government all are subject to supervision by the Supreme Leader. As scholar Abbas Milani has noted, “ever since its inception [the Supreme Leader] has been an absolutist authoritarian ruler . . . [whose] word is considered nothing short of divine and thus beyond doubt or reproach.”

Instead of using formal institutions in a regulated manner, the Supreme Leader operates through personal connections and informal networks, thereby obscuring decision-making processes and preventing transparency. Although the Supreme Leader does use the official instruments of government at times, he does so in a sporadic fashion that avoids creating the appearance of dependence. Thus, seminary ties and family relationship are more important than electoral outcomes and appointments to official government positions when it comes to influencing political decisions. With the Supreme Leader continuing the authoritarian role previously played in Iranian history by a monarch or shah, the rule of law remains an elusive concept. The separation of personal and official power remains lacking. Moreover, without functioning institutions to regulate the political playing field between incumbents and challengers, peaceful change is nearly impossible. As a result, the Supreme Leader has prevented the diffusion of power to the state bureaucracy, while still keeping the façade of republican government as political cover.

The Office of the Supreme Leader includes a small group of senior advisors who provide counsel to the Supreme Leader, as well as a larger number of clerical representatives assigned to each of the twenty-one cabinet

9 Article 57, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Using a typology of human relations, Bill claims that the Iranian world view is based on “emanation” and “direct bargaining” relations (what might be analogized to absolutism and personalism) while the western world view is based on “boundary management” (what could be considered rule of law), thus, helping explain the inability of the two states to reconcile their differences and move forward positively. pp. 23-33.
ministries, the military units, and the provincial governments as ideological watchdogs.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, the Supreme Leader is able to avoid reliance on the government for information or advice, and is able to communicate directly with multiple levels of government. The Office of the Supreme Leader receives funds from the public treasury; however, the full budget, which includes substantial funds from other sources, is unknown and there is no measure of accountability.

\textbf{The Formal Process of Selecting a Supreme Leader}

The Supreme Leader is selected by a body known as the Assembly of Experts which consists of eighty-six clerics, elected once every eight years by the general public.\textsuperscript{14} To stand for election to the Assembly, the Council of Guardians must first approve the Islamic credentials of the clerical candidate. Since the initial Assembly election of 1982, the qualifications imposed on candidates have grown increasingly strict, as seen in the Guardian Council’s approval of roughly 66 percent of the applicants in 1990, less than 50 percent in 1998, and approximately 33 percent in 2006.\textsuperscript{15} According to the Constitution, the Assembly of Experts may also determine whether the Supreme Leader loses the qualifications to lead and move for dismissal; \textsuperscript{16} however, given the Supreme Leader’s control of the Guardian Council, which approves candidates for the Assembly of Experts, the likelihood of the Assembly’s removing him is remote.

Indeed, Supreme Leader Khamenei’s clerical representative to the IRGC, Mojtaha Zalnour, declared in November 2009 that “The members of the assembly. . . do not appoint the Supreme Leader, rather they discover him and it is not that they would be able to remove him any time they would wish so.”\textsuperscript{17} Zolnour then continued, explaining that “in the Islamic system, the office and the legitimacy of the Supreme Leader comes from God, the Prophet, and the Shi’ite Imams, and it is not that the people give legitimacy to the Supreme Leader and are able to remove him when they want.”\textsuperscript{18} Although the Assembly in the mid-1980s anointed Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader, Khomeini overruled their

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  \item \textsuperscript{13} Samii, “The Iranian Nuclear Issue and Informal Networks,” p. 67; Michael Rubin, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards – A Rogue Outfit?” \textit{Middle East Quarterly}, Fall 2008, p. 38.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Articles 107 and 111, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} William Samii’s comments in Panel Discussion on Iran’s Elections. (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, December 12, 2006). Available at <http://www.aei.org/events/filter.all,eventID.1435/transcript.asp>
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Article 111, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} “Iran’s Supreme Leader Cannot Be Removed,” \textit{Reuters} (November 13, 2009). Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/13/AR2009111301264.html>
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
decision after a falling out with Montazeri, notwithstanding Khomeini’s lack of constitutional authority to do so. The Assembly simply acquiesced to Khomeini’s dictum. Thus, while the Assembly appears on paper to have significant power, the practical effect of the Supreme Leader’s indirect control of the Assembly makeup is to make the Assembly just another subordinate entity.

Qualifications to serve as Supreme Leader are vague and subject to interpretation. Article 5 of the Iranian Constitution calls for the Supreme Leadership to be held by the most “just” and most “pious” cleric “who is fully aware of the circumstances of his age [and is] courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability.” Article 109 then states:

The essential qualifications and conditions for the Leader are: a) Scholarship, as required for performing the functions of mufti in different fields ofIslamic jurisprudence; b) Justice and piety, as required for the leadership of the Islamic people; and c) Right political and social perspicacity, prudence, courage, administrative facilities and adequate capability for leadership. In case of multiplicity of persons fulfilling the above qualifications and conditions, the person possessing the better jurisprudential and political perspicacity will be given preference.

This official guidance leaves tremendous room for subjective preferences, resulting in it serving primarily as rhetorical cover for authoritarian governance. No objective metric for establishing who best fits these ambiguous qualifications is possible.

When the Supreme Leader dies, resigns, or is dismissed, the Assembly of Experts is charged with selecting a new leader as quickly as possible. In the interim, a panel consisting of the President, the Head of the Judiciary, and a member of the Guardian Council, is to fulfill the duties of the Supreme Leader.19

The First (and Only) Succession

Because the office of the Supreme Leader was intimately tied with the person of Ayatollah Khomeini and because Ali Khamenei was not the most religiously qualified, charismatic, or influential figure during his tenure as President (1981-1989), it may be that Khamenei’s appointment was intended by some as a means of diminishing the power of the Supreme Leader’s office. Prior to the 1989 Constitutional Revision, the President shared power with a Prime Minister. However, in 1989 the Prime Minister’s office was abolished and the powers of the President were enhanced, largely due to the efforts of then Speaker of the Majlis, Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani.20 By backing Khamenei to succeed Khomeini, while personally pursuing the presidency, Rafsanjani may

19 Article 111, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
have been attempting to shunt Khamenei to what he believed would become a ceremonial office while positioning himself for greater political power. In the event, Khamenei proved able to retain the powers of the Supreme Leader’s office, outflanking Rafsanjani’s bid for power, in part due to term limits that pushed Rafsanjani out of the presidency after eight years (1989-1997).

At the time of Khomeini’s death, the Iranian state was still reeling from nearly a decade of war with Iraq, having concluded a ceasefire less than a year before. Once the unimposing Khamenei was installed as Supreme Leader, attention turned toward Rafsanjani and his efforts to professionalize the government through the employment of technocrats and introduction of rational policymaking procedures. Rafsanjani sought to rebuild the Iranian economy and institute some measure of normalcy to Iranian life following a decade of war. However, conservative clerics feared that Rafsanjani’s actions would lead to de-emphasizing the Islamist nature of the regime and turned to Khamenei as a counter to Rafsanjani. Thus, Khamenei slowly built his base of support, using the conservative backing as a springboard to consolidate his position.

Given this history, the fight over succession to Khamenei will be far more contested than was the case in 1989. All the factions now recognize the monumental power of the office, regardless of the seemingly innocuous character of the individual candidate.

The Current Factions

Iranian domestic politics are often discussed in terms of three basic groups: the conservatives, the pragmatists, and the reformists. In this formulation, the Supreme Leader, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are considered part of a unified conservative bloc that is guided by hard-core Islamist principles and unyielding hostility to the West. Rafsanjani and the economic elite, whether corrupt clerics or comfortably positioned merchants, are identified as pragmatists. They are typically portrayed as less ideological due to their interest in wealth and as a result are presented in a positive light as potential negotiating partners for the West. Reformists are discussed as an idealized version of former President Khatami’s followers, with no distinction made between those seeking marginal adjustments within the system and those seeking wholesale change. During the Khatami Administration (1997-2005), democratic pretensions were assigned to the reformists as matter of course, with assertions that the public and particularly the younger generation preferred reformist policies. Because of the failure to separate Ahmadinejad’s supporters from the traditional conservatives and the failure to distinguish

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reformers from revolutionaries, this three-tiered description is misleading. A more accurate depiction would include at least five major factions.

First and foremost are the entrenched old-guard conservatives who helped form the Revolutionary government and can point to personal ties with Ayatollah Khomeini. While Supreme Leader Khamenei heads this group, he attempts to portray himself as above factional politics.

The second faction is the new generation of ultra-conservative idealists, represented by President Ahmadinejad individually and the IRGC collectively. This group, consisting primarily of laymen, supports the Islamist regime, but at its base rejects the corruption and self-dealing associated with many of the older entrenched clerics.

The wealthy elites, as represented by former President Rafsanjani, comprise the third faction. Rather than seeing the Islamist regime solely as a religious entity, this group sees the regime as a pragmatic means to retain power. Its practical orientation presumably makes it more responsive to western economic power; however, it is committed to the maintenance of the Islamist government as this provides the legitimacy for the privileged positions these clerics and their merchant elite supporters hold.

Fourth are the reformers, including regime insiders such as former President Khatami and former Prime Minister Mir Hussein Mousavi, who want incremental change, but are fundamentally committed to Islamist government. They believe some liberalization is needed; however, they seek only marginal reforms within the existing system, rather than revolutionary change to a new system.\(^{22}\) This group appears to have popular support, but has been unable to reach consensus on specific goals, which leaders to back, or how to pursue change.

Fifth, and last, are regime dissidents, often grouped under the label “reformists,” but more accurately described as revolutionaries. This is a scattered collection of individuals who fundamentally reject the nature of the Islamist regime and who seek a revolutionary shift toward truly democratic institutions, transparency, accountability, and the removal of the unelected clerics. While the ruling elites have often permitted the reformists to publicly debate regime policies, secure in the commitment of the reformists to the regime, the Islamist leaders have prevented dissidents from organizing. Using violent repression, the regime has prevented the revolutionaries from mobilizing their support; thus, making it difficult to know what percent of the Iranian public shares their point of view. Because of this repression, no leader has yet emerged capable of uniting the disparate voices of the revolutionaries.

\(^{22}\) In a February 2009 campaign speech, Khatami specifically addressed the position of his supporters, explaining “we will work within the framework of the system, and we are loyal to the constitution and the leadership.” Tarek El-Tablawy, “Reformist Candidate Slams Iran’s Hard-Line Leader,” Associated Press (February 12, 2009). Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/12/AR2009021200451.html>
With the reformists having been discredited by Khatami’s failure to deliver change and the revolutionaries lacking organization and leadership, the strongest factions in Iran, albeit not the most popular, are the two conservative factions and Rafsanjani’s group. These factions often support similar policies despite their different motivations, although the Ahmadinejad group is more aggressive and openly confrontational toward the West. For example, each of these factions favors pursuit of nuclear technology, including mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle. The old guard conservatives favor development of nuclear weapons, if feasible, in a quiet, covert manner. The new generation conservatives seek nuclear arms at all costs. Rafsanjani’s group favors pursuit of nuclear weapons technology, but likely for bargaining reasons more than anything else. They are receptive to negotiations calling for the West to provide economic incentives in exchange for Iran’s foregoing uranium enrichment or reprocessing activities.

With respect to Iraq, conservatives back the arming of Shia militias and push for a highly autonomous Shia region in Iraq’s south. The difference between the old guard and new generation blocs is the degree of militancy the new generation supports to accomplish its preferred objectives. Pragmatists seek a stable, albeit weak, Iraq under an elected government representing the Shia majority, believing this would minimize the American regional footprint and allow greater expansion of Iranian influence.

In the greater Middle East, conservatives support terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, champion anti-Israeli policies, and seek to obstruct the Palestinian peace process. New generation conservatives adamantly pursue the aggressive export of Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution, whereas old guard clerics and pragmatists seek to publicly distance Iran from its sponsorship of terrorism, although they wish to maintain the flexibility to use terrorism as a foreign policy tool. The pragmatists hold to an anti-Israeli position publicly, but see this mainly as a public relations tool for garnering regional support. Pragmatists are less interested in exporting Khomeini’s Islamist Revolution than in expanding Iranian national power.

A pivotal distinction between the conservatives and the pragmatists is attitude toward economics. Conservatives accept the status quo based on either ideology, or on corruptly benefiting from dominance of the closed markets. For many of the old guard conservatives, national economic policy is not a high priority, or an area of clerical expertise; thus, it receives only passing attention. Moreover, many of the old guard profit from statist or bonyad monopolization under the existing system. New generation conservatives adopt Khomeini’s militant anti-westernism as justification for remaining on the periphery of the

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23 Bonyads are giant trust-like organizations created to take ownership and consolidate the financial holdings of the former Shah and his supporters. Today they hold billions of dollars of assets including a wide variety of commercial enterprises and provide a major revenue source for the Supreme Leader’s office.
global trading system. Pragmatists recognize the economic benefits that would accrue with greater participation in global markets, including access to capital for rehabilitation of the oil infrastructure, and the ability to expand employment opportunities. Thus, they seek greater international trade, but only to the extent it does not infringe upon domestic politics.

Family ties and seminary connections are particularly influential in Iranian society, providing a check on the degree of division between the factions. The long standing tradition of clerical reluctance to publicly criticize other clerics is softening, but it is still a powerful constraint. Moreover, each of the five factions, with the exception of the revolutionaries, is heavily invested in the survival of the current regime. Reformists no less than conservatives owe their status to the Islamist system and are in no hurry to open the flood gates to wholesale popular participation in government.24 Thus, factionalization does not suggest the beginning stages of regime collapse.

The Individual Candidates

Leery of creating a potential challenge, Khamenei has avoided discussion of potential successors. President Ahmadinejad is not a cleric and thus is not a potential candidate. The prime candidate has long been former President Rafsanjani, who currently heads the Expediency Council. However, having antagonized Khamenei and the conservatives by his failure to back the Supreme Leader’s statements regarding the 2009 Presidential election results, he has dramatically alienated needed support.25 Moreover, Rafsanjani’s advanced age – he turns 77 in 2011 – diminishes his chances. In addition, Rafsanjani is neither a Sayyid (a direct descendant of the prophet Mohammed), nor among the most respected clerics, having only obtained the rank of Ayatollah around 2005-06.26 Finally, Rafsanjani, nicknamed “the shark,” is perceived publicly as one of the most corrupt and unpopular politicians in the country. Thus, it seems highly unlikely that Rafsanjani has a realistic chance of succeeding Khamenei as Supreme Leader.

Hojjat al-Islam Mojtaha Khamenei, the son of the current Supreme Leader, has been suggested as a possible successor. The younger Khamenei is seen as an ally of President Ahmadinejad and the conservative militants in the IRGC leadership. Serving as a Chief of Staff for his father, Mojtaha has obtained political experience; however, he lacks substantial religious credentials and public recognition. Furthermore, a familial succession such as this would lead to

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public comparisons to the various monarchic dynasties. Nonetheless, if backed by his father’s base, such as the financially crucial Ayatollah Abbas Vaez-Tabasi in the Holy Precinct of Mashad, Mojtaba would be uniquely positioned to obtain support of both the old-guard and the new conservatives.

Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, former head of the judiciary, is another potential candidate. At 62, he would be young enough to serve a reasonable tenure in office, if appointed. Shahroudi is a conservative with strong religious credentials, having studied under both Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iraqi Islamist Ayatollah Mohammed Baqr al-Sadr. However, a potentially fatal flaw for Shahroudi’s candidacy is that he is Iraqi by birth – a major drawback given the strength of Persian nationalism. As a member of the old guard, Shahroudi’s candidacy would also not be well-received by the new generation of conservatives.

Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, a clerical advisor previously associated with President Ahmadinejad, has been considered by some as a possible successor. A hardliner who has rejected the reformists and notions of democratization, Mesbah-Yazdi has explicitly supported the use of violence to maintain the Islamist regime.27 He is considered popular among IRGC leaders; however, his extremist positions will deny him the support of pragmatists and reformists, and he will be viewed with suspicion by many of the old-guard clerics. In the 2008 Assembly of Experts elections, Mesbah-Yazdi’s supporters fared poorly, indicating the limited breadth of his popular appeal.

From the reformist camp, former President Mohammed Khatami has often been mentioned as a candidate; however, this may reflect western preferences rather than realistic analysis. Khatami alienated the conservatives with his calls for reform and his support of the election protestors in 2009. Moreover, Khatami’s failure to bring significant domestic change during his two terms as President cost him liberal support. His lack of advanced religious credentials would also be used against him. Thus, while he appeals to those seeking a moderate, compromise candidate, he lacks a strong base among the power brokers.

A long-shot candidate could be Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of the Islamic regime’s founder and the manager of the Ayatollah’s shrine south of Tehran. He has avoided open opposition to the current regime, yet is believed sympathetic to the reformists. On the down side, his lack of political experience and organized support suggest he could be merely a figurehead.

With no individual candidate standing out as able to unify the various factions, a compromise solution could see the system shift from a single Supreme Leader to a Supreme Council.28 Conceivably a panel of esteemed

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clerics drawn from among the various factions could serve the purpose of Islamic oversight, keeping with the Shia traditions of consultation and clerical collegiality. Indeed, Article 111 of the Constitution creates a panel to temporarily hold power while the Assembly of Experts decides upon a new Supreme Leader. Yet, placing the Supreme Leader’s powers in the hands of a council indefinitely would likely result in division that would weaken the office, thereby permitting greater space for elected officials to operate or, alternatively, creating an environment for military intervention by the IRGC. Accordingly, the mutual desire of old-guard conservative, pragmatist, and reformist factions to ensure the perpetuation of a clerically-led regime lessens the appeal of a supreme council.

Changing the Office of the Supreme Leader

Some of those straddling the line between the reformist and revolutionary camps advocate modifying the powers of the Supreme Leader as a compromise solution that would maintain the regime's Islamic character while introducing greater accountability. One suggestion would have the people directly elect the Supreme Leader, who would serve a set term rather than for life. Although he would retain his dominant powers, the Supreme Leader would have to respect the wishes of the Iranian public or risk removal at the ballot box. Another plan would place checks on the Supreme Leader’s power, making his office into a co-equal branch of government, unable to simply dictate policy. While this would still permit a much greater role for the clerics than the traditional advisory role of the quietists, it would eliminate the dictatorial authority currently invested in the Supreme Leader. A more far-reaching alternative would transform the Supreme Leader’s office into a ceremonial position, allowing him to serve as head of a constitutional theocracy while the elected officials of government wielded actual power.

At present, the entrenched powers, including the majority of the reformist clerics, oppose these types of modifications. They recognize that diminution of the Supreme Leader’s office effectively undermines the basis of the regime’s legitimacy. If the Supreme Leader is not to have ultimate power, than why should he have any power? The justification for his position is that he is best able to interpret God’s law as revealed through the Koran, the Hadith, and the traditional Sharia. If his interpretations are subject to being over-ridden by the opinions of men, then the notion that the regime is anything but secular is utterly destroyed. Accordingly, both conservative factions, the pragmatists, and reformists oppose major changes to the Supreme Leader’s office.

Revolutionaries support total elimination of the Supreme Leader’s office. Different groups of revolutionaries (royalists, socialists, democrats) support different types of regimes; however, nearly all reject the dictatorial role of the clerics. Yet, lacking freedom of speech and the right to organize,
the revolutionaries are unable to pursue legal change. Moreover, lacking prominent domestic leadership and the ability to mobilize popular support in the face of armed government repression, the revolutionaries have proven unable to mount a serious challenge to the current system. Thus, eradication of the Supreme Leader’s office in the short term seems highly unlikely.

The Role of the IRGC

With the clerical factions divided, the IRGC could decide that military intervention is required in order to ensure the continuance of an Islamist regime. Known in Farsi as the Sepah-e Pasdaran, the Revolutionary Guards Corps was created by Khomeini during the Islamic Revolution to counter the potential threat from the professional military and to provide the clerics with their own armed force. Formally, the IRGC was given the responsibility for maintaining the security of the revolution internally and exporting the Islamic revolution abroad. The mandate to provide regime security has given the IRGC authority to act domestically against regime opponents and to use the Basij, a national reserve of locally based regime supporters, as an enforcement arm of the clerical leadership. Numbering between 10,000 and 30,000 in 1980, the IRGC grew to over 250,000 active fighters by 1985. Recent estimates place IRGC manpower at approximately 120,000, with another 100,000 active Basijis, and potential to mobilize more than 500,000 reserves who have participated in limited training.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC was transformed from a palace guard into the premiere military organization in Iran, staffed with the best soldiers and receiving the best material support, the best training, and the highest pay. Today, it has its own air force, navy, and infantry; maintains its own intelligence service; runs strategic think tanks, defense research and development programs, and its own universities; coordinates Iranian support for Islamist terrorist groups abroad; and holds primary responsibility for the regime’s nuclear weapons program. At the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the Mullahs channeled the ideological fervor of the IRGC into participation in civic rebuilding projects. Since then, the IRGC has also become an increasingly important player in the Iranian economy, and under the Ahmadinejad administration has increased its direct political activity to unprecedented levels. According to the IRGC Commander, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the IRGC is not only a military organization, but also a political and cultural force, with a holistic mission to

29 In this capacity, U.S. District Court Judge Royce Lamberth compared the IRGC to the Nazi Party’s SA organization. Heiser v. Iran, 466 F. Supp. 2nd 229 (D. D.C. 2006).
31 Military Balance 2004-05, 124; Wehrey, et al., The Rise of the Pasdaran, 44 (suggesting 3 million Basijis, of which nearly 600,000 participate in regulate military training).
protect and defend the Islamic system. Although a separate professional military force, the *Artesh*, exists alongside the IRGC, the *Artesh* lacks the ability to counter the IRGC, or to threaten the existing regime on its own.

Long suspected of engagement in black market activities, the IRGC has taken a more open role in commercial affairs, including automobile manufacturing, construction, telecommunications, media, and oil field development. During the 1990s, the IRGC was suspected of facilitating illegal oil exports from Iraq in return for hefty payoffs. By one 2004 account, the IRGC controls six dozen illegal entry points on Iran’s border, through which an estimated $9.5 billion worth of goods come into Iran annually. Front companies owned by the IRGC serve as a major conduit for the import of technology necessary to Iran’s varied weapons of mass destruction programs, leading to the inclusion of several IRGC officers in UN sanctions. Under the Ahmadinejad administration, economic projects have increasingly been steered to IRGC-owned companies via “no-bid contracts” while the IRGC has been the recipient of below market rate government loans. Between 2005 and 2009, approximately 750 government contracts were awarded to IRGC entities in the construction, oil, and gas sectors. Ominously, in late 2009 an IRGC firm purchased controlling interest in

39 Frederic Wehrey, et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2009), pp. 57-64. Among the contracts awarded to the IRGC’s primary commercial affiliate, *Ghorb Khatam*, are a $2.09 billion contract to develop phases of a natural gas field, a $1.2 billion contract to develop the Tehran metro, and a $1.3 billion contract for a pipeline construction project. In November 2009, another IRGC controlled firm obtained a $2.5 billion contract to build a new freight rail line linking the port city of Chahbahar to the state rail network.
the state telecommunications company, providing the IRGC with power over this vitally important aspect of social control.40

The special role of the IRGC has enabled it to develop institutional interests of its own. Former IRGC members are increasingly found in the ranks of government officials, including provincial governorships, key executive offices, and nearly thirty percent of the seats in the parliament.41 President Ahmadinejad, a former IRGC officer, has retained close ties to the IRGC, appointing IRGC veterans to head the Law Enforcement Forces, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Oil, and Foreign Ministry, as well as to the Supreme National Security Council.42 The IRGC actively assisted Ahmadinejad’s campaigns in both 2005 and 2009, despite legal prohibitions against IRGC partisan political activity. Moreover, the IRGC played a decisive role in crushing popular protests after the 2009 election, going so far as to have the Basij Commander send a letter to Tehran’s Chief Prosecutor asking charges be filed against Mir Hossein Mousavi for threatening national security.43 The efficacy displayed by the IRGC Basijis in ending mass participation in the protests has only increased the IRGC’s influence.44 According to the IRGC,
political involvement is justifiably undertaken in order to fulfill the Guard’s responsibility to ensure the Islamist character of the regime.45

Given these interests, the senior leaders in the IRGC might conclude that instability regarding succession to the Supreme Leader’s office could jeopardize their positions. As the IRGC, like the clerics, relies on the Islamist nature of the regime for legitimacy, it cannot afford installment of a more open and accountable government. Indeed, integrating the IRGC with the regular military would likely be one of the first steps taken by a less ideologically based regime. Therefore, using their Constitutional authority as protectors of the regime, the IRGC could mount what would effectively be a military coup, appointing a cleric such as Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi as the nominal Supreme Leader while holding the reins of power behind the scenes.

Yet another possibility is that the IRGC itself may be developing a generational split. As an ideologically based organization, IRGC members receive intensive Islamist indoctrination. Consequently, the corruption associated with certain high-ranking IRGC officers and the lack of turnover at the top ranks, along with a wariness of perceived post-Khomeini moderation, most notably with respect to former President Mohammad Khatami, may combine to create a constituency in the middle and junior ranks of the IRGC that is dissatisfied with the existing order and capable of manifesting that extremism militarily. Young Islamist ideologues in the IRGC may resent the expansion of the IRGC into economic endeavors, seeing this as detracting from the holy mission of the force and as nothing but a means for top level officers to line their pockets.46 Thus, there may be an element within the IRGC that sees the IRGC’s senior leadership as similar to many in the clerical establishment in terms of corruption. This younger generation, attracted by Ahmadinejad’s public projection of asceticism and piety, could result in a fractured IRGC in the event of a conflict between the cleric old guard and Ahmadinejad.

To date, the interests of both the original generation of IRGC leaders and the new generation coincide in supporting Ahmadinejad. The originals are contemporaries of Ahmadinejad and see him as a means toward even greater political and economic power. The new generation sees Ahmadinejad as less tainted by corruption than the clerical establishment and willing to speak openly in support of Islamist extremism. Whether this mutuality of interests will continue is uncertain. Should a crisis occur, the Guard’s senior leaders could react by declaring solidarity with the new generation and joining them in ousting the corrupt clergy. A unified IRGC could present an even greater threat to the West, given its ideological fanaticism and its control of Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

45 Alfoneh, “Indoctrination of the Revolutionary Guards,” p. 3.
Conclusion

With no consensus successor and with concerns that dividing power among a council may diminish the strength of the regime, the conditions are ripe for an IRGC power grab. It has steadily increased its role in both commercial and political affairs, while also ensuring it maintains responsibility for the domestic military security of the regime. In the event the IRGC did decide to assume power, it would likely place a figurehead cleric in the Supreme Leader’s office in order to claim it was faithfully following Ayatollah Khomeini’s vision. Likewise, to prevent the clergy from unifying against it, the IRGC would attempt to co-opt key clerics by offering economic benefits. Such a regime would welcome the continuation of international sanctions, giving it more opportunity to dominate the Iranian economy and emplace authoritarian measures of control upon the population. In the long term, this could increase domestic support for democracy in Iran; however, in the short term, it would allow the regime to complete its quest for nuclear weapons in order to deter external interventions. In sum, the outlook for progress in terms of democracy and human rights in Iran appears no better post-Khamenei than at present.