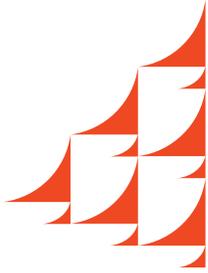


The Arab Gulf States
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Political Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Rise of the Revolutionary Guards

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February 5, 2018

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2019

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About the Author

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Alfoneh grew up in Tehran but moved to Denmark with his family in 1988. He served as an elected member of the Herlev City Council from 1994-98 (Social Democrats). His professional experience includes various positions at the Press and Information Office of Federation of Danish Industries, the parliamentary group of the Social Democratic Party of Denmark, a lectureship in political economy at the University of Southern Denmark from 2003-04, and a research fellowship at the Institute for Strategy at the Royal Danish Defence College from 2004-06. Alfoneh worked as a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute from 2007-13 and as a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies from 2013-16. Since 2016, Alfoneh has worked as the main Iran analyst for The Arab Weekly, and is a nonresident senior fellow at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council.

Alfoneh is a political scientist by training and holds a BA and an MA from the University of Copenhagen. He speaks Persian, Danish, English, and reads German.

Executive Summary

There is no indication of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei abdicating or being removed from leadership in the near term, and biology has traditionally been the most likely midwife for leadership change in the Islamic Republic. However, the question of political succession in Iran remains pertinent: What will happen after Khamenei's passing?

This paper does not claim to prophesize who will succeed Khamenei. However, from an analysis of the political dynamics at play during the 1979 systemic transition and 1989 succession as well as a study of the discrepancy between the constitution and the political praxis of the regime, the paper predicts that:

- In line with earlier instances, the rules and procedures for political succession enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic will be ignored and retroactively adjusted to legitimize the individual or group prevailing in the factional struggle over succession.
- Relations with the United States will be a theme in the factional succession struggle because of the (perhaps false) perception that those in charge of Iran's policy toward the United States also will have a better chance of appointing Khamenei's successor.
- As opposed to the 1989 succession, during which the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was almost absent from the factional struggle, the IRGC will use its economic, political, and military power to mobilize public support, marginalize opponents among Iran's civilian technocratic elites, and emerge as kingmaker by identifying and supporting Khamenei's successor.
- Accordingly, the future "Leader of the Islamic Revolution," or supreme leader in political parlance, whoever he may be, will, for all practical purposes, be beholden to the IRGC.

Based on this scenario, U.S. policymakers involved in shaping policies toward Tehran must take into consideration the implications of succession rivalries. U.S. policymakers must also strategically plan how to face the challenges of a future transformation of the Islamic Republic into a military-style dictatorship, albeit one with a clerical figurehead.

Introduction

In political systems without strong and legitimate democratic institutions, succession¹ is often mired in some level of crisis and uncertainty.² In such systems, succession politics heightens the struggle for power, as different factions try to mobilize the broader public for their cause, and may even culminate in a purge among the ruling elites of the regime. The entire process is at times extremely sensitive to external influence.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is no exception to this rule: It experienced one systemic transition, from monarchy to Islamic Republic, in 1979 and one leadership succession in 1989, during which Hojjat al-Islam (later Ayatollah) Ali Khamenei took over the mantle of leadership from his predecessor and founder of the regime, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Both incidents exemplified the crises and uncertainties faced by most nondemocratic political systems, and there is some indication that succession after Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will prove just as, and perhaps more, problematic than in 1979 and 1989.

The succession woes of the regime are rooted in blatant disregard for rules and procedures, and retroactive constitutional adjustment to legitimize the rule of the individual, or faction, that prevails in the factional struggle for power.

These crises and uncertainties, however, are not so much caused by absence of well-known rules or procedures for political succession in the Islamic Republic. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran addresses the succession *problematique* at some length.³ The problems, rather, arise from the discrepancy between theory and praxis. The succession woes of the regime are rooted in blatant disregard for rules and procedures, and retroactive constitutional adjustment to legitimize the rule of the individual, or faction, that prevails in the factional struggle for power.

Even though there is no indication of Khamenei abdicating or being removed from leadership in the near term, and in spite of biology being the most likely midwife for leadership change in Tehran, the question of political succession in the Islamic Republic is pertinent: What will happen after Khamenei's passing?

¹ This paper uses Bialer's definition of succession as "the order in which, or conditions under which, a person or group succeeds to political office, and the effects of this process on the structures and policies of the political system of the nation state." Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 65.

² For a comparative study of crises and uncertainties in Eastern bloc regimes, see Martin McCauley and Stephen Carter, eds., *Leadership and Succession in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1986). The People's Republic of China has at times provided the exception that proves this rule as discussed in Bo Zhiyue, *China's Elite Politics – Political Transition and Power Balancing* (New Jersey: World Scientific Publishing, 2007), 35-53 and 431-33. The March 2018 constitutional amendments, including removal of term limits for the president, may end this anomaly.

³ See Appendix, Table 1.

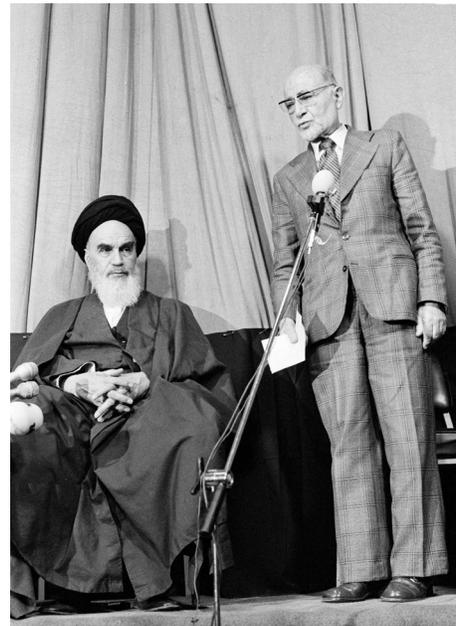
This paper does not claim to prophesize who will succeed Khamenei. However, by analyzing the political dynamics at play during the 1979 systemic transition and 1989 succession – based on a study of the discrepancy between the constitution and the political praxis of the regime, and by comparing the political dynamics at play in present day Iran – the paper presents a likely scenario for Khamenei’s succession.

Khomeini’s Power Grab

Since the victory of the revolution and overthrow of the monarchy on February 11, 1979, Iran has been a theocracy – a regime ruled by the Shia clergy and protected against internal and external enemies by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

A theocracy, or *vilayat e-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), was indeed what Khomeini initially demanded in lectures while in exile in Najaf, Iraq from 1965 to 1978. Those lectures were later compiled into a book first published in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1971⁴ and later clandestinely distributed in Iran. However, as Khomeini tried to broaden public support for the revolution, and in particular during his short exile in France in 1978 and early 1979, he consistently assured the secular opposition to the shah’s regime of his intention to establish a democracy rather than a theocracy in Iran.

Nowhere is this promise more manifest than in the draft constitution⁵ prepared by Khomeini’s associates in Paris while he was preparing for his return to Iran.⁶ Hassan Habibi, the main author, completed the outline of the draft constitution on January 22, 1979, and it was this text that Khomeini took to Tehran on February 1, 1979.⁷ In line with Khomeini’s promises in Paris, there is no reference to theocratic rule or the principle of *vilayat e-faqih* in the draft constitution: The president was to be the head of state, and there was no reference to a “Leader of the Islamic Revolution.”⁸



Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, seated, with the prime minister of his provisional government, Mehdi Bazargan, in Tehran, Iran, Feb. 6, 1979 (AP Photo/Campion)

⁴ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Velayat-e Faqih: Hokumat-e Eslami* [Guardianship of the Jurist: Islamic Government] (Beirut: No publisher, 1971).

⁵ “[Matn-e Pishnevis-e Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Tahiyeh Shodeh Dar Sal-e 1358](#)” [Text of the Draft Constitution Produced in the Year 1979], Abbas Amirentezam Official Website, accessed January 20, 2019.

⁶ The author’s account of the draft constitution is largely based on Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran, Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, trans. John O’Kane (New York: I.B.Tauris, 1997), 22-38.

⁷ *Ibid*, 22.

⁸ “[Matn-e Pishnevis-e Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Tahiyeh Shodeh Dar Sal-e 1358](#)” [Text of the Draft Constitution Produced in the Year 1979], Abbas Amirentezam Official Website, accessed January 20, 2019.

On February 4, 1979, following Khomeini's return to Iran but before the February 11, 1979 declaration of neutrality of the Imperial Army⁹ and final victory of the revolution, he issued a decree appointing Mehdi Bazargan as his prime minister. The decree further tasked Bazargan with establishing a transitional government, organizing a referendum "in order to change the political order of the country into an Islamic Republic," and to convene "a constituent assembly to prepare the constitution of the new order."¹⁰ The very notion of vilayat-e faqih was still absent from Khomeini's vocabulary at this point – an absence, which according to Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Khomeini's confidante, was due to "forgetfulness"¹¹ but was more likely a part of Khomeini's mendacity and deception.

Perhaps persuaded by Khomeini's false promises, on March 30-31, 1979, 98.2 percent of Iranian voters supported the establishment of an "Islamic Republic."¹² Following the referendum, Khomeini immediately abandoned his previous support for the secular draft constitution and called for a new constitution based on the principle of vilayat e-faqih, and establishment of an Islamic state led by a Shia cleric, which for all practical purposes meant himself.

Khomeini did so by openly calling for engineering the composition of the nascent Assembly of Experts – Khomeini's name for the constituent assembly, so "experts of Islam" and not "Western-oriented people" dominated the body that was to produce the first Constitution of the Islamic Republic.¹³ Accordingly, the election to the Assembly of Experts was rigged, so the vast majority of its members were Khomeini followers.



Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then speaker of Iran's Parliament (photo taken around 1980-85) (Wikimedia Commons)

⁹ "[Matn-e Elamiyeh-ye Bi-Tarafi-ye Artesh va Pirouzi-ye Enqelab-e Eslami-ye Iran](#)" [The Army's Declaration of Neutrality and Victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran], *Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies*, accessed January 24, 2019.

¹⁰ Ruhollah Khomeini, "[Hokm-e Tashkil-e Dowlat-e Movaqat be Aqa-ye Mehdi Bazargan](#)" [Decree to Mr. Mehdi Bazargan to Form a Transitional Government] in *Sahifeh-ye Emam: Majmoueh-ye Asar-e Emam Khomeini: Bayanat, Payam-ha, Mosahebeh-ya, Ahkam, Ejazat-e Shari va Nameh-ha* [Pages of the Imam: Compilation of the Works of Imam Khomeini: Statements, Messages, Interviews, Rulings, Religious Edicts and Letters] (Tehran: Moasseseh-ye Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Emam Khomeini, accessed January 20, 2019), 54-55.

¹¹ Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Enqelab va Pirouzi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Salha-ye 1357 va 1358* [Revolution and Victory: Record and Memoirs of the Years 1979 and 1980], ed. Mohsen Hashemi (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2004), 355-58.

¹² Gregory Jaynes, "[Khomeini Declares Victory in Vote For A 'Government of God' in Iran](#)," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1979.

¹³ Ruhollah Khomeini, "[Masaleh-ye Qanoun-e Asasi va Majles va Showraha va Karshekani-ye Gorouhakha](#)" [The Issue of the Constitution, the Parliament, the Councils, and Obstruction of the Small Groups] in *Sahifeh-ye Emam: Majmoueh-ye Asar-e Emam Khomeini: Bayanat, Payam-ha, Mosahebeh-ya, Ahkam, Ejazat-e Shari va Nameh-ha* [Pages of the Imam: Compilation of the Works of Imam Khomeini: Statements, Messages, Interviews, Rulings, Religious Edicts and Letters] (Tehran: Moasseseh-ye Tanzim va Nashr-e Asar-e Emam Khomeini, accessed January 20, 2019), 169-70.

Abdol-Rahman Qasemlu, the leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the sole individual elected who openly opposed vilayat-e faqih, fearing arrest, never took part in discussion of the constitution.¹⁴

For those who did participate, Khomeini's leadership and imposition of vilayat-e faqih was above discussion. Explaining why the Assembly of Experts had abandoned the draft constitution, Javad Fatehi, one of the constitutional fathers, argued: "First, the general Iranian public, by its participation in the March 30-31, 1979 referendum, has responded positively to the ruling of its leader and with 98 percent vote has attested and confirmed the leadership of the imam. In doing so, it has declared its solidarity with him. From a theological point of view and as a peerless source of emulation,¹⁵ *fatwa* [religious edict], and guidance, people in Islamic countries obey him. Thus, the imam is our leader and president plenipotentiary."¹⁶

Members of the Assembly of Experts less enthusiastic about imposition of vilayat-e faqih emphasized the difficulties of finding a substitute for Khomeini, but never dared to directly oppose his leadership or the theory of state upon which his rule was based.

Members of the Assembly of Experts less enthusiastic about imposition of vilayat-e faqih emphasized the difficulties of finding a substitute for Khomeini, but never dared to directly oppose his leadership or the theory of state upon which his rule was based.¹⁷

The resulting Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was adopted by referendum on December 2-3, 1979, was a document full of contradictions trying to align Islamic legalist versus non-Islamic secular elements, and democratic with anti-democratic elements.¹⁸

¹⁴ Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, trans. John O'Kane (New York: I.B.Tauris, 1997), 32.

¹⁵ The Shia clerical hierarchy bears some semblance to the Roman Catholic church, but its structure is more opaque due to lack of a "pope" as supreme authority. Since the 16th century, Shia theology has divided "the Shia into two categories: The mojtaheds, those who possess legal knowledge (therefore holders of authority), and their imitators who are supposed to scrupulously apply their directives to remain on the right path." In order to become a mojtahed, one must be recognized as such by other mojtaheds. Those among the mojtaheds who manage to reach a "high level of social popularity" and "successfully" organize "a profitable network through his relations with different authorities inside the seminary and abroad, such as businessmen and political or social authorities" can potentially become a marja, or source of emulation. See Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Islam in Iran x. The Roots of Political Shi'isms," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, accessed January 23, 2019; and Mehdi Khalaji, "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Focus 59, September 2006.

¹⁶ "Jalaseh-ye Chaharom 29 Mordad 1358" [The Fourth Session August 20, 1979] in *Mashrouh-e Mozakerat-e Qanoun-e Asasi* [Annotated Deliberations of the Constitution] (Tehran: Hoqouqi va Omour-e Majles, September 5, 2009).

¹⁷ See, for example, statements from Rahmatollah Moqaddam Maraghehi, "Jalaseh-ye Panzdahom 21 Shahrivar 1358" [The Fifteenth Session September 12, 1979] in *Mashrouh-e Mozakerat-e Qanoun-e Asasi* [Annotated Deliberations of the Constitution] (Tehran: Hoqouqi va Omour-e Majles, October 10, 2009).

Other critics were Abol-Hassan Banisadr, Hamid-Allah Mir-Moradzehi, Seyyed Ahmad Nourbakhsh, and Ezzat-Allah Sahabi.

¹⁸ Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, trans. John O'Kane (New York: I.B.Tauris, 1997), 1.

The theocratic elements provide the fundamental tenets of the constitution: While awaiting the return of the Shia Messiah, the “guardianship [*vilayat*] and leadership [*imamat*] of the community of believers [*ummah*] devolve upon the theologian [*faqih*] who is just, pious, fully aware of the circumstances of his age, courageous, and resourceful, who is considered and recognized by the majority of the people as leader.”¹⁹

These qualifications are not proscriptive but describe Khomeini’s character and personality as seen by the fathers of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. Just to be on the safe side, Khomeini was mentioned by name seven times, no less, in the constitution.²⁰ Foreseeing the regime would face difficulties finding a substitute for Khomeini, the constitution also opened the path of collective leadership: “Should no theologian enjoy such a majority, the leader of a leadership council composed of qualified theologians”²¹ could succeed him.

Chapter VIII of the constitution emphasized that Khomeini “was recognized and accepted as a source of emulation and leader by a decisive majority of the people”²² and as such endowed him with vast powers, including appointment, dismissal, and acceptance of resignation of the following key positions:

- The six theologians of the 12-member Guardian Council
- The supreme judicial authority of the country
- The supreme leadership of the armed forces: joint force chief and the IRGC chief commander
- The president of the republic (signing the decree formalizing the election by the people or dismissal of the president)²³

The Assembly of Experts is a largely self-regulating body composed of mojtaheds (sources of emulation), who were initially appointed by Khomeini and duly reciprocated his trust by declaring Khomeini the leader of the Islamic Revolution, or supreme leader, as they prepared the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. The first election to this body was held December 10, 1982, and 82 mojtaheds were elected by the voters to the assembly.

Candidates to the Assembly of Experts however, had to first be preselected by the constitutionally mandated Guardian Council.²⁴ This 12-member council is composed of “six just theologians” appointed by the supreme leader and “six Muslim lay jurists” appointed by the Islamic Consultative Assembly, which is the Iranian Parliament. Candidates to the Parliament are themselves subjected to filtering by the Guardian Council²⁵ and so are the

¹⁹ “[Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Jomhouri-ye Eslami-ye Iran](#)” [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran] Chapter 1, article 5 (Tehran: Markaz-e Pazhouhesh-ha-ye Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami, accessed January 20, 2019).

²⁰ Ibid, chapter VIII, article 107.

²¹ Ibid, chapter VIII, article 107.

²² Ibid, chapter VIII, article 107.

²³ Ibid, chapter VIII, article 110.

²⁴ Ibid, chapter VI, article 91.

²⁵ “[Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Jomhouri-ye Eslami-ye Iran](#)” [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran] Chapter VI, article 72 (Tehran: Markaz-e Pazhouhesh-ha-ye Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami, accessed January 20, 2019).

candidates for the president of the republic.²⁶ In other words, even after the first election to the Assembly of Experts, the body supposedly electing and monitoring the performance of the supreme leader was indirectly appointed or approved by Khomeini.

Apart from the supreme leader, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic also endows another institution with extraordinary powers: “The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps ... is to be maintained so that it may continue its role of guarding the revolution and its achievements.”²⁷ The constitution further allows the IRGC to engage in economic activities: “In time of peace, the government must utilize the personnel and technical equipment of the army in relief operations, and for educational and productive ends, and the Construction Jihad [holy struggle for development], while fully observing the criteria of Islamic justice and ensuring that such utilization does not harm the combat-readiness of the army.”²⁸

Distrusting the remnants of the Imperial Army, Khomeini and the constitutional fathers not only chose to recognize the IRGC as a counterbalance to the army, but endowed it with the right to intervene in domestic politics.

The IRGC was not established by a single person but emerged as the Imperial Army declared its neutrality in the revolution and Iran descended into revolutionary chaos. Militias with conflicting political ideologies, armed with weapons looted from the army and police garrisons, emerged to fill the power vacuum in Iran.²⁹ Distrusting the remnants of the Imperial Army, Khomeini and the constitutional fathers not only chose to recognize the IRGC as a counterbalance to the army, but endowed it with the right to intervene in domestic politics. This role is manifest in the difference between the role of the army, which was constitutionally mandated to “safeguard the territorial integrity of Iran”³⁰ and the IRGC, which was tasked with the more abstract “guarding the revolution and its achievements.”

In this manner, Khomeini, the “Leader of the Islamic Revolution,” utilized the draft constitution to mobilize public support for the revolution, then usurped leadership in violation of the draft constitution, retroactively changed the constitution to legitimize his power grab, and utilized the IRGC to suppress any domestic opposition.

²⁶ Ibid, chapter IX, article 118.

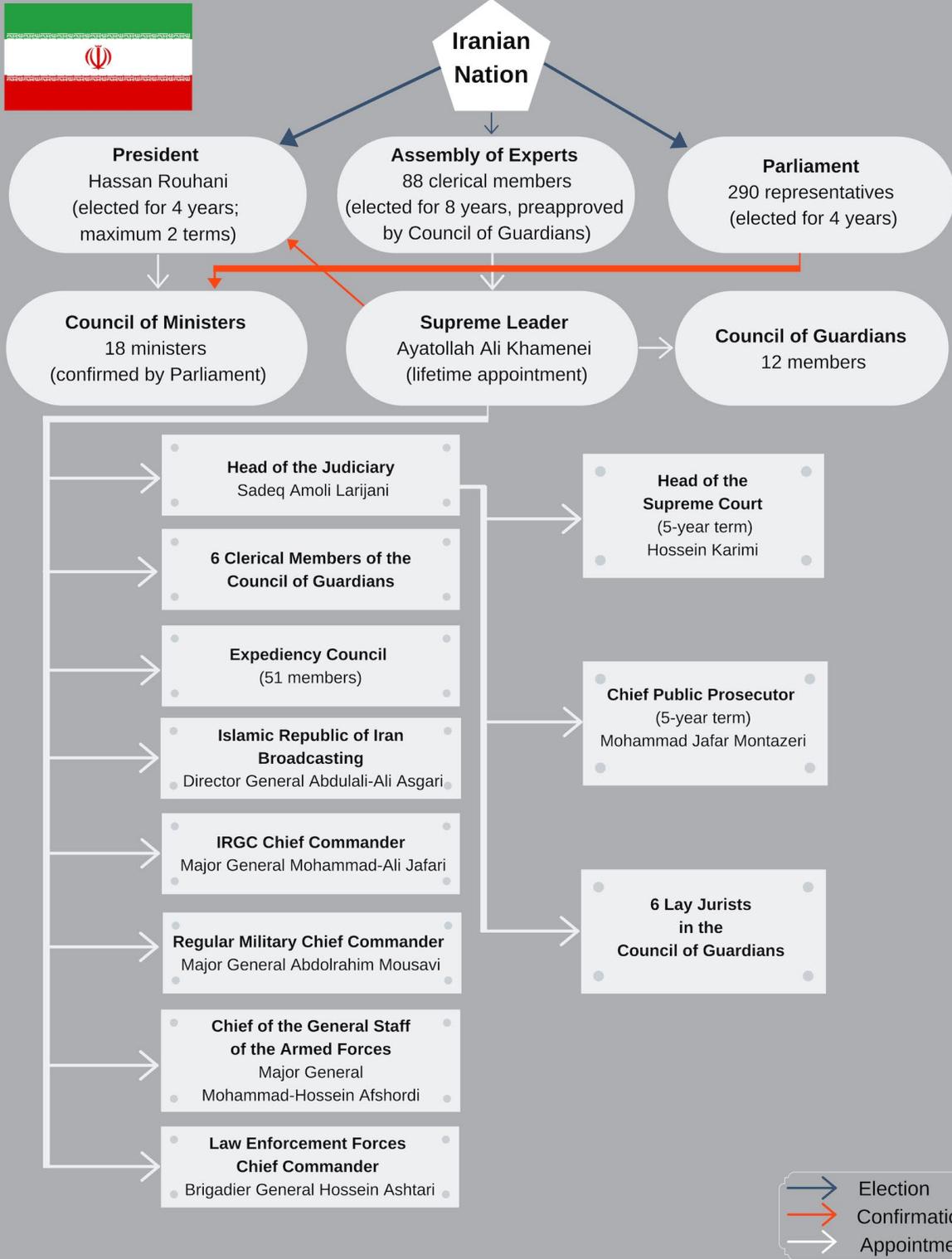
²⁷ Ibid, chapter IX, article 150.

²⁸ Ibid, chapter IX, article 147.

²⁹ For the early history of the IRGC see Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards is Turning Theocracy Into Military Dictatorship* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2013).

³⁰ “[Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran](#)” [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran] Chapter IX, article 143 (Tehran: Markaz-e Pazhouhesh-ha-ye Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami, accessed January 20, 2019).

Formal Constitutional Power Structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran



Khomeini's Power Grab

Khomeini's seizure of power was decisive, but his poor health set in motion a long struggle for succession among the ruling elites of the Islamic Republic. Arguably, the crisis over Khomeini's transition had already begun in January 1980, when he suffered a heart attack.³¹ At the time, the supreme leader had no successor designate, and the transitional government led by Bazargan had resigned on November 5, 1979,³² in protest of Khomeini's endorsement of the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and taking U.S. diplomats hostage.³³

In the absence of a transitional government and following Khomeini's hospitalization, and after the Iraqi invasion of Iran on September 22, 1980 and with the intense rivalry over who among the ruling elites of the Islamic Republic should engage in secret negotiations with the United States, the triumvirate of mid-ranking clerics, "hojjat al-Islams" – Khomeini, Rafsanjani, and Ahmad Khomeini, the son of the grand ayatollah – managed to outmaneuver most of their domestic rivals and de facto ruled Iran. However, in order to preserve a semblance of legality and legitimacy, on July 17, 1985, the Assembly of Experts unanimously elected Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri as deputy supreme leader and successor designate³⁴ – a position for which there was no constitutional provision, and a decision Montazeri himself claims he was unaware of.³⁵



Then president of Iran, Hojjat al-Islam Ali Khomeini, at a press interview in Iran, Nov. 8, 1982 (AP Photo)

At the time, the triumvirate perceived Montazeri as a bookish scholar, who preferred his library at the theological seminary in Qom to the political arena in Tehran. What they did not realize was the influence of Montazeri's associates, in particular his son-in-law Hojjat al-Islam Hadi Hashemi and his brother Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Hashemi, who were in charge

³¹ "[Tasavir-e Tarikhi Az Rahi-Shodan-e Emam Khomeini be Bimarestan-e Qalb Dar Bahman 58](#)" [Historical Photos of Imam Khomeini Heading for Hospitalization at the Heart Hospital in January 1980], *Tasnim News Agency*, January 23, 2017.

³² "[Dowlat-e Bazargan Estefa Dad](#)" [The Bazargan Government Resigned], *Tarikh-e Irani*, accessed January 20, 2019.

³³ Bazargan perceived his own defeat as a function of the near-universal law of radicals seizing control from moderates in the wake of social revolutions. See Mehdi Bazargan, [Engelab-e Iran Dar Do Harekat](#) [Bazargan: Iran's Revolution in Two Moves] (Tehran: Mazaheri, 1984). Apart from his personal experiences, Bazargan's book is highly influenced by Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1938).

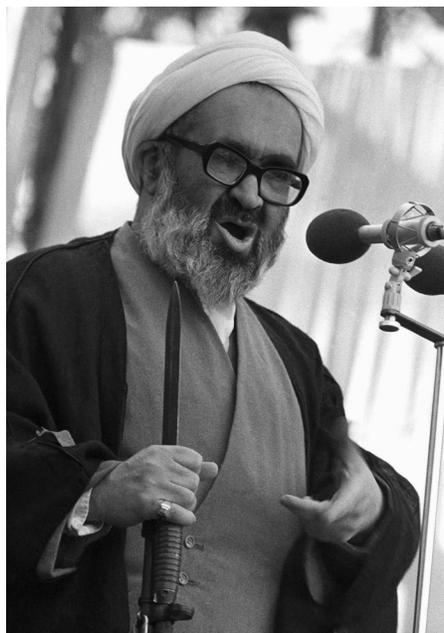
³⁴ "[Entesab va Azl-e Ayatollah Montazeri](#)" [Appointment and Removal of Ayatollah Montazeri], *Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies*, accessed January 20, 2019.

³⁵ The Assembly of Experts apparently tried to keep Montazeri's appointment secret, but Ayatollah Hadi Barikbin, a member of the assembly and Qazvin Friday prayer leader, accidentally shared the information with the public during one of his sermons. Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri* [Memoirs of Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri] (Los Angeles: Sherkat-e Ketab, 2001), 263. For a discussion of Montazeri's performance as successor designate, see Mohsen Kadivar, "[Shakhsiat-e Dovom-e Nezam](#)" [The Second Person of the Regime], *Kadivar.com*, May 1, 2016; Mohsen Kadivar, "[Bahar-e Qaem-Maqami](#)" [The Spring of the Deputy], *Kadivar.com*, April 8, 2017.

of the Liberation Movements unit of the IRGC³⁶ – the Liberation Movements and the Quds Force were the two organizations within the IRGC engaged in extraterritorial operations. The Liberation Movements unit, whose members were followers of Montazeri, did not recognize the authority of the triumvirate and were aggressively pushing for Montazeri to succeed Khomeini as supreme leader.

Upon learning about a secret arms deal between the United States and the Islamic Republic,³⁷ which President Ronald Reagan later called a “strategic opening to Iran,”³⁸ and the triumvirate’s involvement in procuring U.S. arms through Israeli intermediaries, Mehdi Hashemi leaked the information to the Lebanese magazine *Ash-Shiraa*, which exposed the arrangement on November 3, 1986. The Montazeri faction hoped the leak would scandalize the triumvirate, but the campaign to dethrone the triumvirate failed: Khomeini, who had received intelligence of the leak, on October 27, 1986 instructed Intelligence Minister Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri to arrest the Hashemi brothers and 50 key members of Montazeri’s network within the Liberation Movements.³⁹ The organization itself was gradually disbanded and its responsibilities were taken over by the Quds Force.

Following a protracted public relations effort to tarnish the image of Montazeri, on March 26, 1989 Khomeini dismissed him as successor designate.⁴⁰ In his memoirs, Montazeri points out the letter was in Ahmad Khomeini’s handwriting, and doubts it was dictated by the supreme leader.⁴¹ Montazeri further says Ali Fallahian, who served as deputy minister of intelligence at the time, told him Ahmad Khomeini acted on his sick father’s behalf.⁴² Under any circumstance, following Montazeri’s dismissal, the triumvirate paved the path for Khomeini to take the mantle of leadership after



Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, holding a rifle with a fixed bayonet, addresses a rally at Tehran University, Nov. 23, 1979. (AP Photo)

³⁶ “[Shahid Montazeri va Jonbesh-ha-ye Azadibakhsh](#)” [Martyr Montazeri and the Freedom Movements], *Rasekhoon*, accessed January 20, 2019.

³⁷ Fath-Allah Omid Najafabadi, member of the first Parliament after the 1979 revolution, who was a friend of Manucher Ghorbanifar, arms dealer and middleman in the Iran-contra affair, informed Montazeri of the arms deal between the United States and the Islamic Republic. He was imprisoned following the defeat of the Montazeri camp and was executed November 7, 1988 on sodomy charges. Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri* [Memoirs of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri] (Los Angeles: Sherkat-e Ketab, 2001), 277.

³⁸ Ronald Reagan, “[Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy](#),” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, March 4, 1987.

³⁹ Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri, *Khaterat-e Siyasi 1365-1366* [Political Memoirs of 1986/87] (Tehran: Moassesseh-ye Motaleaat va Pazhouhesh-ha-ye Siyasi, 1990), 22.

⁴⁰ Ammar Irani, “[Dalael-e Azl-e Montazeri ...](#)” [The Reasons Behind Dismissal of Montazeri ...], *Ammar Irani Blog*, May 23, 2016.

⁴¹ Hossein Ali Montazeri, *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri* [Memoirs of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri] (Los Angeles: Sherkat-e Ketab, 2001), 370.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 369.

Khomeini,⁴³ but Washington's attempt at improving relations with Tehran was effectively sabotaged. What followed next was a process, as precise as clockwork, that led to Khamenei and Rafsanjani's usurpation of power in the Islamic Republic, which clearly indicates a power-sharing arrangement between the two dating back to the early days of the revolution.

According to Rafsanjani's journal entry on April 6, 1989, 11 days after Khomeini dismissed Montazeri as his successor designate, Rafsanjani and Khamenei invited their political allies to a secret meeting in the Parliament to "discuss the future leader" and about Rafsanjani's future role as president.⁴⁴ On April 19 and 23, Rafsanjani called Ahmad Khomeini to discuss revision of the constitution.⁴⁵ On April 24, Ahmad Khomeini called Khamenei to "read the text of the letter of the imam" in which he ordered the president to convene a group of 20 named individuals to revise the constitution.⁴⁶ On April 29, Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, Assembly of Experts chairman, received a letter, allegedly from Khomeini, emphasizing, rather conveniently for Khamenei, that there was no need for the future supreme leader to be a source of emulation.⁴⁷ Upon receiving the letter, Rafsanjani wrote in his journal: "Some members of the [Assembly of Experts] council are of the belief that one must not remove being a source of emulation as a condition [for leadership]. They will probably change their mind after this letter."⁴⁸



Ahmad Khomeini, son of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, is escorted by armed guards out of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Iran, Nov. 17, 1979. (AP Photo)

The greatest obstacle in the path of Khamenei was indeed the requirement that the supreme leader must be a source of emulation. Meshkini, Khamenei, and Rafsanjani all referred to Khomeini's letter while discussing constitutional revisions.

During the May 2, 1989 discussions of the council revising the constitution, Khamenei, who was still not formally a candidate for leadership, shrewdly said Khomeini was not a source of emulation in 1962, the year of the first religious uprising against the shah's regime, but still people rebelled against the shah.⁴⁹ Asadollah Bayat Zanjani, another member of the council,

⁴³ "[Vaqeiat-e Majara-ye Refrandomi Ke Ayatollah Hashemi Dar Jalaseh-ye Entekhab-e Rahbari Az An Sokhan Goft](#)" [The Truth about the Referendum about which Ayatollah Hashemi Spoke at the Assembly Selecting the Leader], *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, January 21, 2018.

⁴⁴ Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Bazsazi va Sazandegi: Karnameh va Khatrat-e Sal-e 1368* [Rebuilding and Reconstruction: Record and Memoirs of the Year 1989-1990], ed. Ali Lahouti (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2012), 76.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 91 and 98.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 98-99.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 105.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 105.

⁴⁹ "[Mashrouh-e Mozakerat-e Showra-ye Baznegari-ye Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran Davazdah Ordibehesht-e 1368](#)" [Annotated Deliberations of the Council Revising the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran May 2, 1989], *Hoquouqi va Omour-e Majles*, August 26, 2009.

was not convinced and said: “The imam prevailed because of his authority as a source of emulation ...”⁵⁰ Undeterred, Khamenei responded: “How did the leader who has no popular support manage to become the leader?”⁵¹

Intervening on Khamenei’s behalf, Rafsanjani used one of his old stratagems and recounted his alleged private meetings with Khomeini:

Recently, I was in the presence of the imam and heard a sentence, which I will say here ... He said that the situation, conditions, and necessities of being a source of emulation are different than the needs of administering the country today. Those who are at the level of being leaders are not similar [types] as those who are at the level of sources of emulation ... management of the state and leadership is a different work. These are words that I had under no circumstances heard from the imam. This was a new thing that I was hearing from him. This is the last thing that I heard ... At any rate, this is the state of affairs: Vast numbers of the people follow individuals who are not managers of the state, and the legislation and decrees issued by the authorities of the state may differ from religious edicts of gentlemen who are sources of emulation.⁵²

In the following session, Rafsanjani, once again, referring to his alleged private conversations with Khomeini about shortcomings of the constitution, said: “The issue of a successor designate to the leader was one of the issues floating around even before becoming public. He would say: ‘I don’t know how long I will live, and I think when I am no longer here, should a responsibility of mine be unfulfilled, it could create trouble for the regime. For me, it is difficult to wait, even for a single night.’ He [Khomeini] insisted on this. Principally, he is the only one capable of solving this issue, and this is how it was decided to be solved ...”⁵³

While the Assembly of Experts was still engaged in revision of the constitution, Khomeini passed away on June 3, 1989.⁵⁴ The Assembly of Experts convened an extraordinary session on June 4 to elect a successor. Rafsanjani, who had masterminded the removal of Montazeri, and Khamenei both tried to persuade the Assembly of Experts to establish a leadership council. However, the majority of the assembly voted to retain individual leadership.

Next, Seyyed Mohammed Reza Golpayegani’s candidacy for leadership was discussed, but he didn’t receive a large number of votes. Once Golpayegani was defeated, Rafsanjani used all his influence to persuade the assembly to elect Khamenei as “temporary leader,” a position for which there was no provision in the constitution.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ “[Mashrouh-e Mozakerat-e Showra-ye Baznegari-ye Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran Davazdah Ordibehesht-e 1368](#)” [Annotated Deliberations of the Council Revising the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran May 2, 1989], *Hoqouqi va Omour-e Majles*, August 26, 2009.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “[Mashrouh-e Mozakerat-e Showra-ye Baznegari-ye Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran 20 Ordibehesht 1368](#)” [Annotated Deliberations of the Council Revising the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran May 10, 1989], *Hoqouqi va Omour-e Majles*, August 26, 2009.

⁵⁴ Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Bazsazi va Sazandegi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1368* [Rebuilding and Reconstruction: Record and Memoirs of the Year 1989-1990], ed. Ali Lahouti (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2012), 147.

⁵⁵ Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Bazsazi va Sazandegi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1368* [Rebuilding and Reconstruction: Record and Memoirs of the Year 1989-1990], ed. Ali Lahouti (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2012), 150-51.

Rafsanjani's support for Khamenei must have been an unpleasant surprise for Ahmad Khomeini, who had supported Rafsanjani and Khamenei, while perhaps hoping he would succeed his father as supreme leader. But Rafsanjani, addressing the Assembly of Experts, recounted yet another alleged private meeting with Khomeini, during which the founder of the Islamic Republic had expressed support for Khamenei's leadership. The assembly then voted overwhelmingly in favor of Khamenei succeeding Khomeini as supreme leader.

Once Khamenei was elected leader by the Assembly of Experts, a referendum held on July 28, 1989⁵⁶ retroactively legitimized his seizure of power. With Khamenei as de facto supreme leader, Rafsanjani declared him "ayatollah" and "mojtahed" overnight and legal requirements for leadership were adjusted to fit the description of Khamenei.⁵⁷ On the same day, Iranians also voted for a new president, electing Rafsanjani. Just as conveniently, the constitution was adjusted to significantly increase the powers of the president, so it reflected the real powers Rafsanjani was bringing with him to the presidency. The duo of Rafsanjani and Khamenei outmaneuvered Ahmad Khomeini and became the new leaders of Iran.

With Khamenei as de facto supreme leader, Rafsanjani declared him "ayatollah" and "mojtahed" overnight and legal requirements for leadership were adjusted to fit the description of Khamenei.

The Rise of the IRGC and Crisis over Succession after Khamenei

Four decades after the revolution and establishment of the Islamic Republic, there are a number of features reminiscent of the past transitions manifest in the current struggle over Khamenei's succession, but there are stark differences this time due to the changed internal and external circumstances. Chief among those differences is the gradual rise of the IRGC as the dominant economic and political force in the Islamic Republic.⁵⁸

The rise of the IRGC as an economic and political force can be dated back to the aftermath of the U.N.-brokered cease-fire ending the eight-year war with Iraq on August 20, 1988. As hundreds of thousands of armed war veterans were returning to their hometowns after a costly war that ended without a victor, Rafsanjani and Khamenei feared the political ambitions of the IRGC and Rafsanjani effectively bribed the IRGC to keep it out of politics.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 240.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 153; "[Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran](#)" [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran] Chapter VIII, article 109 (Tehran: Markaz-e Pazhouhesh-ha-ye Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami, accessed January 20, 2019). For a critique of illegality of Khamenei's leadership see Mohsen Kadivar, "[Shorou-e Rahbari-ye Dini Ba Tadjlis](#)" [Leadership Begun with Subreption], *Kadivar.com*, March 8, 2015.

⁵⁸ For an overview of the economic powers of the IRGC, see Ali Alfoneh, "[How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran's Economy?](#)," *American Enterprise Institute*, no. 3 (October 22, 2007); Ali Alfoneh, "[The Revolutionary Guards' Looting of Iran's Economy](#)," *American Enterprise Institute*, no. 3 (June 23, 2010).

The IRGC Corps of Engineers, which was previously involved in fortifications and quick construction of shelters and bridges, changed its name to the Construction Base and was granted near monopoly over postwar reconstruction of Iran.⁵⁹ These activities, which still continue, include building dams, roads, highways, water diversion and water supply systems, tunnels, oil and gas offshore and port facilities, oil depots, and large oil and gas infrastructure both onshore and offshore.⁶⁰ At the same time, the IRGC has also been involved in Iran's shadow economy and smuggling.⁶¹

The IRGC did not engage in construction activities pro bono; it was paid for engagement in each project on top of its share of the national defense budget. Simultaneously, the IRGC established its own banks and financial institutions, where it accumulated vast profits from government projects and laundered ill-gotten gains from the shadow economy.⁶²

When Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, himself a war veteran and former IRGC member, was elected president in 2005, he embarked on a policy of "privatizing" state-owned businesses and enterprises. The IRGC, claiming it represented the private sector, used its accumulated funds to purchase government-owned entities and businesses at submarket prices. Today, the IRGC's banks and financial institutions are some of the largest actors in the Tehran Stock Exchange.

The rise of the IRGC since the late 1980s is not limited to the economic arena, and by early 2000, it began using its money to campaign for its war veterans running for public office at all administrative levels of the Islamic Republic. This presence reached a peak under Ahmadinejad, whose Cabinet was dominated by IRGC officers. That number has dramatically decreased under President Hassan Rouhani, who has worked to subject the IRGC to civilian control.

Khamenei, on the other hand, approves of the IRGC's infiltration into the Iranian economy and politics. Fearing internal dissent as well as external pressure, he sees the rise of the IRGC as a means of securing the survival of the regime. Meanwhile, the IRGC and its critics are busy planning for the post-Khamenei era.

It is not possible to identify a specific start date to the factional struggle over Khamenei's succession, but the shocking disqualification of Rafsanjani prior to the June 14, 2013 presidential election⁶³ provides a useful point of reference.

⁵⁹ "[Darbareh-ye Ma](#)" [About Us], Qarargah-e Sazandegi-ye Khatam al-Anbia, accessed January 25, 2019.

⁶⁰ "[Prozheh-ha](#)" [Projects], Qarargah-e Sazandegi-ye Khatam al-Anbia, accessed January 25, 2019.

⁶¹ Ali Alfoneh, "[The Revolutionary Guards' Looting of Iran's Economy](#)," *American Enterprise Institute*, no. 3 (June 23, 2010).

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ "[Se Nokteh Darbareh-ye Bozorgtarin Rad-e Salahiat-e Tarikh-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami](#)" [Three Points About the Greatest Disqualification in the History of the Islamic Republic], *Asr-e Iran*, May 31, 2013.

Perhaps acting upon decades of rumors about Khamenei's alleged prostate cancer,⁶⁴ Rafsanjani tried to bring himself into a position to control the impending political succession just as he managed to control Khomeini's succession in 1989. However, this time around, Rafsanjani was facing the formidable growing alliance of Khamenei and the IRGC, which actively prevented Rafsanjani from running for president, ostensibly on age grounds.⁶⁵ Rafsanjani was being isolated just as he himself isolated and finally purged Montazeri and his supporters in the 1980s.

Far from giving up the race, Rafsanjani, who had wisely persuaded his disciple Rouhani to run for president,⁶⁶ as a reserve candidate, urged his own supporters "not to lose hope,"⁶⁷ and endorsed Rouhani's candidacy on June 11, 2013.⁶⁸ In doing so, Rafsanjani once again involved the Iranian public in preparing the ground for the factional struggle over Khamenei's succession.

Rafsanjani's strategy was successful and Rouhani, who won the presidential election, has since continued mobilizing public anger against the IRGC by shaming it, accusing the IRGC of misappropriating public funds and serving its own corporate economic interests.⁶⁹ Rouhani's approach is hardly surprising: The president correctly perceives the economic means of the IRGC as one of its most valuable assets in the struggle over Khamenei's succession.⁷⁰ By trying to block the IRGC's access to government-funded projects, he hopes to weaken it economically and politically in the runup to Khamenei's succession.



The newly established Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps parades past a viewing stand in Tehran, Iran, May 16, 1983. (AP Photo)

⁶⁴ Khamenei himself referred to the rumors in his February 8, 2007 address to the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force. "[Didar-e Farmandehan va Hezaran Nafar Az Aza-ye Nirou-ye Havaei-ye Artesh](#)" [Receiving Commanders and Thousands of Air Force Personnel], *Paygah-e Ettelae-Resani-ye Daftar-e Maqam-e Moazam-e Rahbari*, February 8, 2007.

⁶⁵ [Se Nokteh Darbareh-ye Bozorgtarin Rad-e Salahiat-e Tarikh-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami](#) [Three Points About the Greatest Disqualification in the History of the Islamic Republic], *Asr-e Iran*, May 31, 2013.

⁶⁶ "[Doktor Hassan Rouhani Rasman Elam-e Kandidatori Kard](#)" [Dr. Hassan Rouhani Officially Declares His Candidacy], *Aftab News*, April 11, 2013.

⁶⁷ "[Hashemi: Az Mardom Mikhaham Mayous Nashavand](#)" [Hashemi: I'm Asking the People Not to Despair], *Bahar*, May 23, 2013.

⁶⁸ "[Hemayat-e Hashemi Az Rouhani](#)" [Hashemi's Support for Rouhani], *Tabnak*, June 11, 2013.

⁶⁹ For one of the most direct attacks of Rouhani against the IRGC's economic activities, see "[Sokhanrani-ye Janjali-ye Rouhani Dar Marasem Ba Faalan-e Eqtesadi](#)" [Rouhani's Controversial Address at a Ceremony with Entrepreneurs], *Paygah-e Ettelae-Resani-ye Riasat-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*, June 22, 2017.

⁷⁰ For an overview of the economic powers of the IRGC, see Ali Alfoneh, "[How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran's Economy?](#)," *American Enterprise Institute*, no. 3 (October 22, 2007); Ali Alfoneh, "[The Revolutionary Guards' Looting of Iran's Economy](#)," *American Enterprise Institute*, no. 3 (June 23, 2010).

As Khamenei underwent an operation on his prostate on September 8, 2014,⁷¹ rumors about the supreme leader's prostate cancer resurfaced. The head of Khamenei's medical team, in an attempt to quell the rumors, described the operation as "routine,"⁷² yet incredulously claimed the supreme leader had only received "local anesthetics."⁷³ Had he gone under anesthesia, the regime would have been forced to explain the chain of command while Khamenei was incapacitated. By claiming there was no anesthesia, the regime managed to keep secret the chain of command, if there ever was one.

Discussions about Khamenei's succession gained further weight after the surgery and in the runup to the February 26, 2016 election for the Assembly of Experts, which formally appoints the supreme leader.

On December 13, 2015, Rafsanjani disclosed that a working group within the Assembly of Experts was fully engaged in identifying qualified candidates to succeed Khamenei: "They are getting ready ... and there is a group vetting individuals so that those who are qualified, just in case an incident should take place ... [can take over the leadership]. This is the main work of the assembly."⁷⁴ Rafsanjani's claim was confirmed by assembly members Hashem Hashemzadeh Harisi on May 23, 2016⁷⁵ and Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami on March 5⁷⁶ and December 15, 2017.⁷⁷

By trying to block the IRGC's access to government-funded projects, [Rouhani] hopes to weaken it economically and politically in the runup to Khamenei's succession.

Rafsanjani saw himself in control of the situation, and by commenting on the taboo issue of the possibility of Khamenei's death, he hoped to mobilize the public's support.

However, around the same time, the IRGC and its allies began second stage preparations to seize power by systematically purging Rafsanjani's allies from the Assembly of Experts. Hassan Khomeini, grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic and a key ally of Rafsanjani, was disqualified and so were many other allies.⁷⁸ In doing so, Khamenei and the IRGC effectively removed the magical aura of the young Khomeini's name and lineage, which could have brought Rafsanjani and his allies to the center of power in Iran. Rafsanjani's own life was cut

⁷¹ "[Vaziat-e Omoumi-ye Rahbar-e Enqelab-e Eslami Kamelan Khoub va Tabiee Ast](#)" [The General Conditions of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution are Good and Natural], *Daftar-e Hefz va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Ayatollah al-Ozma Khamenei*, September 8, 2014.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "[Ezharat-e Mohem-e Hashemi Rafsanjani Darbareh-ye Jaygozin-e Rahbari](#)" [Hashemi Rafsanjani's Important Statements Concerning the Successor of the Leader], *ILNA*, December 13, 2015.

⁷⁵ "[Kandida-ha-ye Janeshin-e Rahbari Shenasyi Shodeh-And](#)" [Leadership Successor Candidates Are Identified], *Fararu News*, May 23, 2016.

⁷⁶ "[Jozeeyati Darbareh-ye Komiteh-I Ke Kar-e Entekhab-e Rahbar-e Ayandeh Ra Bar Ohdeh Darad](#)" [Details About the Committee Tasked With Identifying the Future Leader], *Aftab News*, March 5, 2017.

⁷⁷ "[Gozineh-ha-ye Rahbari-ye Ayandeh Be Sourat-e Fowq al-Adeh Mahramaneh Barresi Mishavand](#)" [Future Leadership Options Are Top Secretly Under Investigation], *Mashregh News*, December 15, 2017.

⁷⁸ "[Salahiat-e Naveh-ye Bonyangozar-e Enqelab Rad Shod](#)" [Grandson of the Founder of the Revolution Disqualified], *Aftab News*, February 10, 2016.

short on January 8, 2017,⁷⁹ as he suffered a suspicious heart attack while swimming, which gave further credence to speculation about the purge as a part of the succession struggle. The file of Rafsanjani's death still appears to be under investigation.⁸⁰

By December 2017, the IRGC and Rouhani were trying to mobilize the public against each other in anticipation of the succession. The IRGC and its clerical allies mobilized impoverished shantytown dwellers against the Rouhani government's declared policies of reducing basic food and fuel subsidies.⁸¹ Initially, the anger of the protesters was directed against the president, but as Rouhani's supporters publicly attacked the IRGC's economic corruption, those same protesters vented their anger against the IRGC, Iran's costly military engagements in the Middle East, and even Khamenei.

The intensifying pressure from Washington, after the United States pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement, and its allies is further inflaming the factional fighting in Iran instead of uniting the ruling elites of the Islamic Republic against foreign enemies.

There was additionally a split along those same lines among the ruling elites of Iran regarding other recent protests.

The IRGC, and its allies, or Rouhani, and technocratic elites of Iran, have to some degree either embraced or mobilized public protests against water scarcity, women's protests against compulsory hijab, and moderate Sufi or even ideologically nonconformist Shia cleric protests against the government. These protests cannot be analyzed separately from the struggle over Khamenei's succession.

Finally, the intensifying pressure from Washington, after the United States pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement, and its allies is further inflaming the factional fighting in Iran instead of uniting the ruling elites of the Islamic Republic against foreign enemies. While the Rouhani government accuses the IRGC of provoking crises in relations with the United States, the IRGC has demanded that Iran revoke the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, negotiated under Rouhani, and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and "restart unrestricted nuclear activities."⁸²

Rouhani and leading IRGC officers also appear to be competing with each other for Washington's attention. Once again, the Islamic Republic is facing a challenge as old as the revolutionary regime itself: Who should engage in, and potentially benefit from, negotiations with the United States, and when should they do so? Major General Qassim Suleimani's July

⁷⁹ "[Payam-e Khanevadeh-ye Rafsanjani. Mehdi. Pedaram Ra Koshtand](#)" [The Message of the Rafsanjani Family. Mehdi: They Killed My Father], *Iran Press News*, September 1, 2017.

⁸⁰ "[Dokhtar-e Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani: Motmaenam ke Marg-e Pedaram, Margi Tabiee Naboudeh](#)" [Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's Daughter: I am Convinced the Passing of My Father was Not from Natural Causes], *BBC Persian*, January 1, 2019.

⁸¹ "[Jedal-e Siyasi Bar Sar-e Eteraz-ha-ye Khiabani Bala Gereft](#)" [Political Infighting Flares Up Because of Street Protests], *Fararu News*, December 31, 2017.

⁸² "[Sardar Salami: Nezam-e Ma Az Hamisheh Mostahkam-Tar Ast](#)" [Commander Salami: Our Regime is Stronger Than Ever], *Bartarin-Ha*, April 27, 2018.

26, 2018 address in Hamadan⁸³ and Rouhani's August 6, 2018 televised address⁸⁴ were subtle attempts at initiating a dialogue with Washington. Such a dialogue, in their perception, would help them with an even more immediate and important goal: securing control over Khamenei's succession.

Conclusion

The cumulative impact of and interplay among a number of factors in the Islamic Republic today reveal familiar succession features: disregard for the rules and procedures for political succession enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic coupled with factional competition for taking charge of Iran's policy toward the United States as a means of controlling political succession in Tehran.

However, there is currently a factional struggle for power beyond the usual political infighting in the Islamic Republic. As opposed to the 1989 succession, during which the IRGC was almost absent from the factional struggle, the IRGC is now utilizing its economic, political, and military power to mobilize public support and marginalize opponents among Iran's civilian technocratic elites.

As Rouhani and the IRGC mobilize the public against each other, the situation may spin out of control and trigger antigovernment mobilization far more extensive than the protests in December 2017 and January 2018. Such a situation would force the IRGC to intervene forcefully to ensure the survival of the regime. Large scale popular mobilization coupled with the IRGC's systematic purge of Rouhani's allies and supporters may decrease chances of intra-elite compromise and turn current or former elite members into a genuine opposition force against the regime.

More likely, the IRGC may well prevail in the factional struggle for Khamenei's succession, and the future supreme leader, whoever he may be, will, for all practical purposes, be in full alliance and share power with the IRGC.

Based on this scenario, U.S. policymakers involved in shaping policies toward Tehran must take into consideration the implications of succession rivalries. U.S. policymakers must also shift focus away from potential individual leadership candidates and pay more attention to the likely transformation of the Islamic Republic into a military-style dictatorship, albeit one with a clerical figurehead.

⁸³ "[Sardar Suleimani: Aqa-ye Trump! Nirou-ye Qods Be Tanhayi Harif-e Shomast](#)" [Commander Suleimani: Mr. Trump! The Quds Force Alone is Your Match], *Kayhan*, July 27, 2018.

⁸⁴ "[Mashrouh-e Goftegou-ye Televizioni-ye Rouhani Ba Mardom](#)" [Rouhani's Annotated Televised Address to the People], *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, August 6, 2018.

Table 1: Comparison of Leadership Conditions in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Its Amendment

Chapters and Articles	1979 Constitution (December 2-3, 1979)	1989 Constitution (July 28, 1989)
Chapter I, Article 5	During the occultation of the Wali al-Asr (may God hasten his reappearance) the guardianship [<i>vilayah</i>] and leadership [<i>imamat</i>] of the community of believers [<i>ummah</i>] devolve upon the theologian [<i>faqih</i>] who is just, pious, fully aware of the circumstances of his age, courageous, and resourceful, who is considered and recognized by the majority of the people as leader. Should no theologian enjoy such a majority, the leader of a leadership council composed of qualified theologians will be charged with it according to Article 107.	During the occultation of the Wali al-Asr (may God hasten his reappearance) the guardianship and leadership of the community of believers devolve upon the theologian who is just, pious, fully aware of the circumstances of his age, courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability, will assume the responsibilities of this office in accordance with Article 107.
Chapter VIII, Article 107	Whenever one of the theologians with qualifications in Article 5 is recognized and accepted by a decisive majority of the people as a source of emulation and leader, just as the case is with the eminent Source of Emulation and Leader of the Revolution Grand Ayatollah Imam Khomeini, the leader shall assume all the powers of guardianship [<i>vilayat al-amr</i>] and all the responsibilities arising therefrom. Otherwise, experts elected by the people will review and consult among themselves concerning all those who are qualified sources of emulation and qualified for leadership. In the event they find one of them more qualified for leadership, they will present him to the people as leader. Otherwise, three or five qualified sources of emulation will be presented to the people as members of a Leadership Council.	After the demise of the eminent source of emulation [<i>marja-e taqlid</i>] and great leader of the universal Islamic Revolution, and founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, His Holiness Grand Ayatollah Imam Khomeini, who was recognized and accepted as a source of emulation and leader by a decisive majority of the people, the task of appointing the leader shall be vested with the experts elected by the people. The Assembly of Experts will review and consult among themselves concerning all the theologians possessing the qualifications specified in Articles 5 and 109. In the event they find one of them better versed in Islamic regulation, the subjects of the jurisprudence, or in political and social issues, or possessing general popularity or special prominence in any of the qualifications mentioned in Article 109, they shall elect him as the leader. Otherwise, in the absence of such a superiority, they shall elect and declare one of them as the leader. The leader thus elected by the Assembly of Experts shall assume all the powers of guardianship and all the responsibilities arising therefrom. The leader is equal with the rest of the people of the country in the eyes of law.

Chapter VIII, Article 109	<p>Conditions and characteristics of the leader or members of the Leadership Council:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Theological qualifications and piety in order to issue religious edicts and being a source of emulation 2. Political and social perspicacity, courage, strength, and administrative capabilities for leadership 	<p>Conditions and characteristics of the leader:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Theological qualifications in order to issue religious edicts on different theological matters 2. Justice and piety, as required for the leadership of the Islamic community of believers 3. 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.
Chapter VIII, Article 111	<p>Whenever the leader or one of the members of the Leadership Council becomes incapable of fulfilling his constitutional duties, or loses one of the qualifications mentioned in Article 109, he will be dismissed. The authority of determination in this matter is vested with the experts specified in Article 108. The guidelines for convening the assembly in order to attend to this matter will be decided in the first assembly of the experts.</p>	<p>Whenever the leader becomes incapable of fulfilling his constitutional duties, or loses one of the qualifications mentioned in Articles 5 and 109, or it becomes known that he did not possess some of the qualifications initially, he will be dismissed. The authority of determination in this matter is vested with the experts specified in Article 108. In the event of the death, or resignation, or dismissal of the leader, the experts shall take steps within the shortest possible time for the appointment of the new leader. Till the appointment of the new leader, a council consisting of the president, head of the judicial power, and a theologian from the Guardian Council, upon the decision of the nation's Expediency Council, shall temporarily take over all the duties of the leader. In the event, during this period, any one of them is unable to fulfill his duties for whatsoever reason, another person, upon the decision of majority of theologians in the nation's Expediency Council shall be elected in his place. This council shall take action in respect of items 1, 3, 5, and 10 and sections D, E, and F of item 6 of Article 100, upon the decision of three-fourths of the members of the nation's Expediency Council. Whenever the leader becomes temporarily unable to perform the duties of leadership owing to his illness or any other incident, then during this period, the council mentioned in this Article shall assume his duties.</p>

Source: "[Qanoun-e Asasi-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran](#)" [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran] (Tehran: Markaz-e Pazhouhesh-ha-ye Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami, accessed January 20, 2019).

