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The Next Supreme Leader

Succession in the
Islamic Republic of Iran

Alireza Nader, David E. Thaler, S. R. Bohandy

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Cover photo: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Tebran to deliver a speech, with a picture of the late spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, on the wall behind (AP).

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Summary

The 2009 presidential election in the Islamic Republic of Iran was one of the most transformative events in Iran's modern history. It bared important schisms within the *nezam* (political system) and pitted two key camps against one another, each with a very different vision of what Iran should be and what it should become. It appeared to solidify (at least for the near future) the dominance of the hard-line faction of the Islamist Right under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and continued an ongoing militarization of Iranian politics led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, firmly entrenching a more insular cadre of decisionmakers at the *nezam*'s core. The widespread fraud alleged by the leading opposition candidate, former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, and the *nezam*'s repressive response irrevocably shattered an unspoken contract between the government and the people—one in which the theocratic government had allowed some popular political participation and limited personal space in return for the people's acquiescence to the status quo.

Even the highest authority in Iran, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, did not escape censure by the opposition—a traditional “red line” in Iranian politics that clerics, politicians, and voters alike crossed numerous times after the polls closed. Previously, Khamenei had portrayed himself as above the often-brutal factional “fray” in Iran. But now he came down decisively on the side of Ahmadinejad and his hard-line allies and used the Revolutionary Guards to preserve the status quo. In so doing, he altered the role of the office he occu-

ped, which had been created by the father of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The Supreme Leader is the linchpin of the Islamic Republic: He guides its character, policies, and approach to the outside world. Khamenei is 71 and rumored to be in ill health.¹ Were he to pass away and a succession battle to ensue, the outcome could change the nature of Iran for better or for worse from the U.S. perspective. Because it is patently difficult to predict such an outcome, U.S. analysts and policymakers must prepare for alternative possibilities for succession. To address this challenge, this report has a twofold objective: First, it sheds light on how the position and role of the Supreme Leader might change after Khamenei leaves the scene. Second, it points to indicators that can provide insight into what seems to be the most likely direction for the future succession at any given time. Because the context in which succession would occur becomes more uncertain the further into the future one looks, we focus on the near term—i.e., a succession that would take place within the next two to three years. However, we also speculate about the changes that are likely to ensue in the longer term if Khamenei remains Supreme Leader for the next ten years or more.

To arrive at our conclusions, we conducted a historical analysis of both the institution of Supreme Leader and key aspects of Khomeini's and Khamenei's terms in the position. After examining the justifications for the creation of the Supreme Leader position during the Islamic Revolution, we analyzed the position's constitutional and informal powers and how Khomeini and Khamenei have used these powers. We also explored various debates and political and religious discourses in Iran about the nature of the Supreme Leader, including those surrounding the 1989 succession.

On the basis of this research, we identified a set of three primary factors that will shape the next succession and determine what happens to the institution of the Supreme Leader. In conjunction, we pinpointed indicators that can be used to track how each factor is evolving. Finally, we developed five scenarios that seem to have the greatest relevance, given the historical Iranian discourse on this subject, and

¹ As of January 2011.

analyzed the influence the key factors might have on the relative likelihood that any of these scenarios would occur.

Three Key Factors Will Shape the Next Succession

Three factors will have a decisive influence on the nature of the next Supreme Leader—or even whether there will be a Supreme Leader to follow Khamenei—at the time of the next succession:

- the factions and personalities in positions of power and influence
- the prevailing concept of *velayat-e faghih* (rule of the supreme jurispudent), which forms the ideological and political basis of the Islamic Republic as it exists today
- the decisions and actions of Khamenei’s “personal network.”

How the three factors are configured at the time of succession will have a huge impact on the nature of the next Supreme Leader. By *configuration*, we mean the driving features and prominence of each of the factors in relation to the others. The configuration is fluid; it has evolved several times, even during Khamenei’s rule.

Iran is in a state of great societal, religious, and political transformation. The Green Movement (formed in response to the 2009 presidential election), the women’s rights movement, Iran’s declining economy, and Iranian relations with the United States could all also play a role in determining the outcome of the next succession. However, our focus is succession in the near term, as it would take place in the current political system. The three factors we have identified as the most important in shaping it are all defining elements of the Islamic Republic’s *nezam* as it exists today. Should the succession take place in the longer term—within a decade or two—a number of those other factors may indeed come to assume a more decisive role.

Factor 1: The Factional Balance of Power

The Islamic Republic’s competing factions have a deep and vested interest in shaping the next succession. Iranian history has been character-

ized by backroom politics, especially since the Islamic Republic was established in 1979. Despite the formal rules established by the Iranian constitution, the *nezam's* factionalism and informal style of decision-making continue to reflect a weakness of official political institutions throughout Iranian history. The next Supreme Leader's succession will be determined within this informal and often nontransparent system.

Factions in Iran today can be broadly divided into the Islamist Right and the Islamist Left. Power struggles not only between these groups but also, especially, within them are a hallmark of contemporary politics in the Islamic Republic. Among the most important are competitions within the Islamist Right between pragmatic conservatives and principlists and between principlist subfactions.

Factional interests influenced the selection of Khamenei for Supreme Leader over the heir Khomeini had originally chosen, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, during the 1989 succession. Khamenei met Khomeini's and the Islamist Right's ideological and administrative qualifications for Supreme Leader and in many ways was Montazeri's opposite. But factionalism will play an even bigger role in the next succession than in 1989. Khomeini's supreme authority and iconic status allowed him to designate his successor without much opposition from the Islamic Republic's competing factions. But Khomeini's death and Khamenei's tenure in office led to increased factionalism and early signs of political fragmentation within the *nezam*. This has been especially true under the presidencies of Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Unlike Khomeini, Khamenei has clearly taken sides with the hard-line principlists within the Islamist Right. If Khamenei were to die soon, the principlists would be well positioned to shape the next succession, especially after Ahmadinejad's reelection in June 2009.

Factor 2: *Velayat-e Faghih*

Iran's *nezam* derives its religious and political legitimacy from the concept of *velayat-e faghih*, which underpins the Supreme Leader's authority. *Velayat-e faghih* has historically been an apolitical concept in Shi'a Islam, providing the clergy with religious stewardship of the people—and some temporal authority over the weak, orphaned, and infirm—

in the absence of the 12th Imam, who is believed to have gone into hiding or occultation. This apolitical view of *velayat-e faghih* is frequently referred to as the “traditionalist” or “quietist” school of thought on the subject.

Khomeini reinterpreted *velayat-e faghih* to form the basis of an Islamic state led by the clergy. Two broad schools of thought have since developed under Khomeini’s reinterpretation: the “absolutist” and the “democratic.” Islamist Right proponents of the former view the Supreme Leader’s authority as absolute and derived from divine will, a reading closely associated with Khomeini’s. In contrast, those who favor the democratic view of the concept believe that the Supreme Leader must be popular as well as pious and derive his authority from the people. This school of thought is associated with the Islamist Left. The traditional or quietist view of *velayat-e faghih* remains strong outside Iran, as practiced by Shi’a clergy in Najaf, but also in Qom.

The concept of *velayat-e faghih* prevalent among the clergy during the succession period will shape their views regarding the next Supreme Leader. With Khamenei’s passing, the competition between the absolutist, democratic, and quietist views on *velayat-e faghih* is likely to intensify. Khamenei’s authoritarian rule, his reliance on *velayat-e faghih* to ensure his personal authority, and *velayat-e faghih*’s association with the hard-line Islamist Right have weakened its legitimacy among the key elements of the clergy and political elite, as well as broad segments of the Iranian population.

Factor 3: Khamenei’s Personal Network

Lacking the religious and political legitimacy of his predecessor, Khamenei has maintained his power and influence through a personal network that bypasses and overshadows formally elected decisionmaking bodies. This network includes the sizable Office of the Supreme Leader; a web of special representatives throughout the government, military, and society; and key clerical and military institutions, such as the Revolutionary Guards. This personal network acts as Khamenei’s “eyes and ears” throughout the *nezam* and enables him to shape Iran’s domestic and foreign policies, despite the opposition of various factions and power centers. The network, and the Supreme Leader himself,

have become openly wedded to relatively narrow factional interests. Its members will want to protect those interests in the next succession.

The 2009 election vividly demonstrated this factor at work, when Khamenei endorsed Ahmadinejad as president under highly controversial circumstances, and his personal network acted decisively to preserve the status quo against what it described as a “velvet revolution” led by the opposition and supported by outside powers. Just days before the voting, General Yadollah Javani, the Revolutionary Guards’ political bureau chief, announced that the Guards would act to “snuff out” any attempts at a velvet revolution. In the election’s immediate aftermath, the Guards and the Basij militia were used to put down large-scale opposition protests after taking over internal security.

Today, hard-liners within the Revolutionary Guards have arguably become the most powerful component of Khamenei’s personal network. They and other members of the network may act decisively to prevent an “unfavorable” Supreme Leader from being selected, even if he is elected through constitutional means by the Assembly of Experts. In addition, with his endorsement of Ahmadinejad, Khamenei broke with the Supreme Leader’s traditional role of standing “above the fray” of factional politics. As a result, he can no longer claim a broad-based constituency, and this too will have consequences in a future succession.

Five Succession Scenarios Best Cover the Range of Possibilities

Given our analysis of the key factors and leadership concepts that have been discussed in Iran, five scenarios describing different end states for succession of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, over the next two to three years seem to best represent the spectrum of possibilities. All of the scenarios are plausible, although they are not equally likely to come about. The likelihood of each scenario will depend on how the three key factors are configured at the time of succession. This configuration is in flux, largely propelled by the 2009 presidential election and its aftermath.

The five scenarios are as follows:

- *status quo*, in which Khamenei is followed by a leader like himself, possibly someone he handpicks
- *absolutist*, an absolute dictator, with strong religious and political credentials, supported by a cult of personality
- *democratic*, a reformist leader who is more accountable to the republican institutions and the electorate than Khamenei currently is
- *Leadership Council*, an executive leadership group that replaces a single leader
- *abolition*, the demise of the Supreme Leader position in favor of republicanism.

The first four scenarios represent leadership options that the *nezam* could at least portray as occurring within the framework of the Islamic Revolution and *velayat-e faghih*. In other words, the next Supreme Leader could make the case that the *nezam* remains founded on the legacy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the “true” aims of the Islamic Republic (according to the *nezam*’s interpretation). The fifth scenario, abolition, represents the demise of the Islamic Republic as it exists today. These scenarios are by no means predictive; post-Khamenei Iran is more likely to look like some adaptation of one or two of the scenarios rather than an exact replica. Their purpose, rather, is to help analysts and policymakers make sense of indications that may be related to succession.

Developments in the three key factors, and how they reconfigure in relation to each other, can be watched by analysts to determine the relative likelihood that one or more scenarios will come about as succession approaches. They can also be used as signs of maneuvering among factions and power centers for advantage in preparation for the eventual succession. For each factor, we identify a set of indicators. In the case of factional competition, these indicators include the relative power a given faction holds within key government institutions, the balance of factional representation in the *nezam*, and the relationships of given factions with the Supreme Leader. Indicators for *velayat-e faghih* include statements by clerics about divine authority and popular will, the political and religious standing of those clerics, government

responses to their statements, and the use of *velayat-e faghih* by the government itself. Indicators of how the role and influence of Khomeini's personal network are evolving include the status and nature of the Revolutionary Guards, the cohesiveness of the activities of the Supreme Leader's special representatives, and the size and authorities of the Office of the Supreme Leader.

In Light of the 2009 Election, the Status Quo Scenario Seems Most Likely in the Near Term

The postelection alignment of the three factors—with the Islamist Right solidifying its dominance of elected institutions, *velayat-e faghih* seeming to lose ground as a decisive factor, and Khomeini's personal network having taken resolute action to protect the status quo—suggests strongly that the most likely succession scenario in the next few months or years is the status quo scenario. The absolutist scenario is a close second. Although possible, it is considerably less likely that any of the other three scenarios would come to fruition in the near term. We base this assessment on indications that the election reinforced the power of Khomeini's personal network and the hard-line principlist wing of the Islamist Right while considerably weakening the Islamist Left and republican institutions.

At the same time, though, we contend that the election diminished the *legitimacy* of Khomeini and the institution of the Supreme Leader, and this could very well have consequences in the longer term. The election revealed rifts within both Iran's political leadership and its clerical establishment that could eventually challenge the Supreme Leader's personal network and the currently dominant faction. The elevated likelihood of the status quo and absolutist scenarios does not preclude challenges to Khomeini from influential power centers outside his network of support.

The Likelihood of Longer-Term Succession Scenarios Is Uncertain

While predicting the course of a potential succession in the Islamic Republic (or any other major political developments, for that matter) in the very near term is already difficult, uncertainty increases exponentially the further into the future one looks. Many variables will evolve in ways that are hard to determine from the present vantage point. If succession occurs in ten, 15, or even 20 years, both external and internal forces could be at play that significantly alter the political, economic, and societal contexts in which decisions are made within the *nezam*—and how the three key factors are configured when the time for succession eventually comes.

First, the “old guard,” whose several dozen members were active in spearheading the Islamic Revolution and who have held positions of power and influence in the Islamic Republic ever since, will be gone. A new cadre of leaders, many of whom came of age during the Iran-Iraq War, will have replaced their elders. They will bring with them a different perception of the Islamic Republic and different life experiences that will influence their actions and decisions.

Second, the alignment of factions, informal networks, and power centers in the Islamic Republic will change in ways difficult to predict. This goes to the heart of the configuration of all three key factors, but particularly to that of the factional balance of power and Khamenei’s personal network. The Revolutionary Guards are currently the dominant political, military, and economic institution in Iran, with the election seeming to have cemented their position. But while it is difficult to see their power waning in the near future, it is not a foregone conclusion that they will dominate Iran in ten years.

Third, economic, societal, cultural, and other endogenous issues will evolve and put pressure on the *nezam* to adapt. Among the most prominent of these are providing job opportunities for a youthful population, considering the demands of Iran’s women’s rights movement, and dealing with the burgeoning information revolution. These and other challenges will provoke the *nezam* either to meet the expanding needs of the population and risk moderating its present ideological

tendencies or to ignore and suppress the popular will, risking increasing social polarization and greater alienation between the government and population. Regardless of any preferences of Khamenei and the *nezam*'s current institutions, these pressures will almost certainly influence any longer-term context in which succession occurs.

Finally, relations between Iran and the United States could affect what follows Khamenei, should he continue to rule for many years. The ultimate outcome of the ongoing confrontation over Iran's nuclear program looms large in this relationship. But other issues like human rights, Iran's support for terrorism, and prospects for peace or continued conflict between Israel and its Palestinian and other Arab neighbors play pivotal roles as well. A "history" is yet to be written of this relationship over the next decade or so, and it too will inform a longer-term succession.