

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei: Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Ayatollah Ali Khamenei: Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Background: Role of the Supreme Leader

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which grants a learned Islamic jurist (*faqih*) – a cleric tasked with interpretation of *sharia* (divine Islamic law) – with the role of Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader of Iran holds final religious and political authority over all affairs of the state, ruling essentially by divine right. *Velayat-e faqih*, as practiced in Iran, is a modern innovation in Shi’a religious doctrine based on the ideology of [Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini](#), the founder of the Islamic Republic. For centuries before, Shi’a Muslims traditionally adhered to a limited interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*, in which the clergy was responsible for the interpretation and administration of religious law, while governance was the realm of secular authorities.

In 1970, Khomeini published his book, *Islamic Government*, advocating for an absolute version of *velayat-e faqih*. According to Khomeini’s vision, the Shi’a clergy (*ulama*) would oversee the creation and rule over an Islamic state in Iran, expanding the purview of the *ulama*’s role into the traditionally secular realm of governance. Khomeini built on the works of contemporary Sunni Islamist thinkers, such as Sayyid Qutb and Abul A’la Maududi, whose theocratic form of government served as a model for the Islamic Republic, and he was influenced by modern conceptions of nation-state power. He postulated that the state should be governed by *sharia*, and as the clergy had the greatest understanding of Islamic law, they should naturally be the guardians of state power until the return of the *mahdi*, or the Hidden Imam, a messianic Shi’a figure. Before Khomeini, Shi’a clergy typically advocated for quietism when it came to politics, refraining from engaging in politics or attempting to establish Islamic governance. In the traditional quietist view, because human beings are imperfect and fallible, they are thus considered incapable of establishing true, just Islamic rule in the absence of the *mahdi*. Khomeini broke from this tradition, arguing that rule by clerics was justified and necessary to preserve Islam until the *mahdi*’s return.

While Khomeini borrowed from established theories of Islamic government, he also developed his own unique ideas and interpretations of Shi’a Islam. For instance, Khomeini called for a singular leading *faqih*, chosen from among those who have attained the highest status among the Shi’a clergy as a recognized *marja e-taqlid* (source of emulation), to be chosen to serve as the highest Islamic jurist (*velayat-e faqih*) with authority for the final say over all state and religious matters. Under Twelver Shi’ism, the dominant form of Islam practiced in Iran, a *marja e-taqlid* is a cleric holding the highest rank of Grand Ayatollah or Imam, who presides over a *hawza* (religious seminary) and makes decisions regarding the interpretation and practice of *sharia*, which is adhered to by the followers and lower-ranking clergy of their respective *hawzas*. *Marjas* serve as representatives of the *mahdi* on Earth and are responsible for setting and defining the parameters of Islamic jurisprudence. In Khomeinism, the designated *marja* as the *velayat-e faqih* would further draw upon their connection to the divine to steer the ship of state, exercising earthly authority as a deputy of the Hidden Imam.

Shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran conducted a popular [referendum](#), where 97 percent of voters purportedly supported the establishment of an Islamic Republic. It is important to note that the

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draft constitution presented before the referendum did not explicitly mention Khomeini's ideas of Islamic governance or *velayat-e faqih*. Therefore, those who participated in the vote (although some Marxist and Kurdish factions boycotted it, the participation was nearly universal) may not have necessarily intended to endorse a theocratic autocracy but rather to support a form of secular governance with a traditional head of state and Islam as the foundation for the legal system. While still in exile in Paris in September 1978, he [said](#), "Our intention is not that religious leaders should themselves administer the state, but that they should guide the people in determining what the demands of Islam are."

After the referendum, Khomeini retracted his support for the original secular draft constitution and advocated for establishing a system based on *velayat-e faqih*. Khomeini strategically worked to populate the newly formed Assembly of Experts for Constitution, responsible for crafting the [first official constitution](#) of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran, with individuals loyal to him. This ensured that the authoritative role of a *marja e-taqlid* serving as the *velayat-e faqih* was codified into law and that his own designation as Iran's Supreme Leader was an accomplished fact.

Khomeini's bait-and-switch maneuver ensured that the popular Iranian Revolution transformed into an Islamic Revolution, discarding the aspirations of non-Islamist partners within the broad-based anti-Shah coalition. These temporary allies, who had rallied around Khomeini, perceived him as a symbolic leader and spiritual guide for the revolution but failed to comprehend the extent of his ambitions to rule Iran. As Khomeini and his acolytes set about consolidating their power, they [executed](#) hundreds of former regime agents and leftists, communists, secularists, Kurds, and other opposition elements within the anti-Shah coalition.

Khomeini swiftly implemented his vision of *sharia*, emphasizing "purifying" society and the body politic from perceived Western political and cultural influences. This included imposing bans on music and alcohol, enforcing laws mandating the veiling of women, instituting harsh penalties, including execution for crimes of sexual immorality such as adultery and homosexuality, and an aversion to cultural, educational, or economic engagement with the West.

Enmity toward the West, particularly the United States, still frequently referred to as the "[Great Satan](#)," and the export of the revolution are defining principles of [Khomeinism](#), in addition, to *velayat-e faqih*. Iran has framed its Islamic Revolution as a supranational liberation movement of oppressed Muslims from "arrogant" colonialist powers who seek to subjugate Islam. Article 152 of Iran's [constitution](#) speaks of the country's foreign policy being based on "the defense of the rights of all Muslims." Article 154 explicitly states that the Islamic Republic "supports the just struggles of the mustad'afun [oppressed] against the mustakbirun [tyrants] in every corner of the globe." Thus, the Islamic Republic's aspiration to lead a global movement is built into its DNA.

In practice, this means that the Supreme Leader is not just the leader of Iran but also of all Muslims who subscribe to the Khomeinist notion of *velayat-e faqih*. Iran has backed Shi'a [terror movements](#) and militias, most notably [Hezbollah](#), throughout the region that adhere to this doctrine and, thus, prioritize loyalty to Iran's Supreme Leader over loyalty to their own nation. Iran has also established a [worldwide network of religious and cultural institutions](#) to cultivate pockets of loyalists to the Islamic Revolution

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and the Supreme Leader in countries around the globe as part of its long-term project to spread the Islamic Revolution.

Within Iran, the Supreme Leader is the most powerful figure in the country and controls all [organs of state](#) and religious power. The Iranian constitution sought to create a hybrid governing system with theocratic authoritarian and republican elements; however, the system is designed so that the republican elements are always subordinate to the will of the Supreme Leader. While Iran has an elected executive ([president](#)) with authority to appoint several key cabinet officials, a representative legislative body ([majles](#)), and a [judiciary](#), these republican elements all operate under the oversight of the Supreme Leader. The republican elements are responsible for managing the day-to-day affairs of the government, but the Supreme Leader supervises their performance to ensure that all decisions align with Khomeinist principles and the Islamic Revolution.

At the time of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini insisted that a clerical Supreme Leader was not inconsistent with democracy, [claiming](#), “Since the people love the clergy, have faith in the clergy, want to be guided by the clergy, it is right that the supreme religious authority should oversee the work of the Prime Minister or of the President of the republic, to make sure that they don't make mistakes or go against the law: that is, against the Koran.” Due in part to both design and circumstances, over the years, the Supreme Leader's power has grown relative to the republican elements of Iran's revolutionary system. Instead of solely providing oversight and ensuring that all functions of statecraft comply with *sharia*, in practice, the Supreme Leader possesses final decision-making powers over Iran's foreign and domestic policies.

Underscoring the Supreme Leader's dominance is the fact that he even has authority over who can serve in Iran's quasi-elected positions through the [Guardian Council](#), a 12-member deliberative body with six members directly appointed by the Supreme Leader and the other six approved by the *majles* from a list of candidates put forward by the head of Iran's judiciary. The Supreme Leader appoints the head of the judiciary, so he enjoys total control over the Guardian Council, which approves candidates for office and reviews all laws to ensure their compliance with *sharia*. As a result, no candidate can run for office, and no law can be passed without the consent of the Supreme Leader.

Given the Supreme Leader's status as a deputy of the Divine, there are essentially no earthly checks on his power. An 88-member body called the [Assembly of Experts](#), composed of Islamic legal scholars, is responsible for appointing the Supreme Leader in the event of a vacancy. It is also constitutionally mandated with authority to dismiss the Supreme Leader if he becomes incapable of fulfilling his constitutional duties or if it is found that he did not possess the proper qualifications for the role initially. The Assembly of Experts is theoretically supposed to [monitor the Supreme Leader's activities](#), but there are no formal channels under Iran's constitution through which the Assembly can critique or challenge the Supreme Leader. Since 1991, the Guardian Council has assumed a supervisory role over the Assembly. The Guardian Council ensures that candidates meet the conservative-dominated Council's vetting standards effectively gaining approval from the Supreme Leader and becoming subject to his veto power as well. This has further eroded any potential oversight role that the Assembly may have had.

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The Supreme Leader holds numerous other roles that serve to underscore his absolute authority within Iran. He has the power to appoint and to dismiss the heads of various critical institutions essential to the functioning of the state, ensuring his control over key centers of power, including the judiciary, military, domestic law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and the media. As the commander-in-chief of all armed forces, he appoints their leadership, including both the conventional military and the regime's praetorian guard, the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#), which is responsible for preserving and spreading the Islamic Revolution at home and abroad. The Supreme Leader also oversees and has significant influence over Iran's [intelligence agencies](#), ensuring they serve his foreign and domestic policy imperatives. This control grants him a potent tool for monitoring and repressing Iran's citizenry and dissidents abroad, as well as for facilitating terrorist activities beyond Iran's borders.

Furthermore, the Supreme Leader also effectively controls Iran's state-owned media apparatus, the [Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting \(IRIB\)](#). This umbrella organization is constitutionally mandated to be the sole legal TV and radio broadcaster in Iran. The Supreme Leader has the authority to select the head of IRIB, ensuring that regime loyalists have control over all legally disseminated broadcast media in Iran. The IRIB's mission is to consistently deliver messaging that supports the regime's domestic, foreign policy, and military goals. Its programming aims to strengthen moral and religious values within Iranian society, uphold the revolutionary ethos of Iran, and to provide viewers with a theoretical foundation for [Khomeinist](#) principles, including *velayat-e faqih*. Thus, the IRIB plays a vital role in the Supreme Leader and revolutionary regime's maintenance of cultural and political hegemony within Iranian society.

The power of the Supreme Leader is further bolstered by his control over a significant financial empire, which operates as a parallel economy to that of the Iranian state. Iran has a system of religious endowments, also known as [bonyads](#), that hold billions of dollars in financial assets. The *bonyad* system was established shortly after the Islamic Revolution by [Ayatollah Khomeini's](#) decree. The "seed money" for these endowments came from property and assets seized from the Shah of Iran, the royal family, as well as confiscated properties from religious minorities, dissidents, and others who fled Iran. The *bonyads* function as both profit-making conglomerates, operating hundreds of companies engaged in trade and commerce in fields such as automobile manufacturing, infrastructure, construction, financial services, and oil and gas. They also serve as charitable and cultural institutions that provide social services to the poor, orphans, wounded veterans, and families of martyrs, while promoting the regime's religious and political ideology. Furthermore, there are allegations that some *bonyads* channel [funds to Hezbollah and other regional terrorist groups](#), fueling terrorism and sectarian conflicts in the region to advance Iranian foreign policy objectives.

Because Iran primarily relies on oil revenues for the majority of its discretionary budget, the *bonyads* are able to operate in an opaque manner, without being subjected to public transparency or government audits, and are fully exempt from taxation. At the same time, the *bonyads* are reportedly [allocated](#) roughly half of the state's budget and frequently secure government contracts. Although they serve as conduits for corruption and their substantial resources impede competition from more efficient private-sector businesses, the *bonyads* are a vital pillar of the Supreme Leader's political survival.

They provide him with an independent means of dispensing patronage to clerical and military elites, who are granted autonomous operation over individual *bonyads*. This autonomy allows them to amass

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large profits, ensuring their loyalty to the Supreme Leader. Moreover, the *bonyads* contribute to fostering dependence among impoverished Iranians on their financial assistance, thereby strengthening their support for the ruling regime. However, in recent years, the *bonyads* have served as a locus of protests and civil unrest. Since December 2017, Iran has witnessed a renewed protest movement critical of the regime's economic [mismanagement and corruption](#) driven in part by anger over increased government spending on *bonyads* and religious institutions at a time of increased privation, unemployment, and inflation for ordinary Iranians.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei: An Introduction

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, only two individuals have held the role of Supreme Leader of Iran. The first was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, who served from the beginning of the Islamic Republic in April 1979 until his death on June 3, 1989. His successor, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei, was a member of Khomeini's inner circle who took over as Supreme Leader the following day and has held the role since. Khamenei, a lover of poetry and literature, became a Shi'a cleric at the age of 11. At the time of his succession, he was thought to be a [soft-spoken pragmatist](#) who might lead the country in a more moderate direction than his firebrand predecessor. However, his leadership instead has been defined by brutality, corruption, and increased enmity toward the West. Under Khamenei's helm, Iran's human rights situation has deteriorated, the country has come to be regarded as the world's [worst state sponsor of terrorism](#), and its illicit [nuclear program](#) remains one of the most vexing challenges to global security.

Khamenei's ascension to the pinnacle of power in Iran was improbable. Profiles of Khamenei refer to him as an "[unremarkable](#)" figure who lacked the charisma, popular support, or religious stature and credentials of his predecessor. In fact, the Islamic Republic had to [amend its constitution](#) to allow for his succession, as Khamenei, a mid-ranking cleric who had not even attained the rank of ayatollah, [did not meet the prerequisite](#) that the *velayat-e faqih* (highest juror) be a *marja e-taqlid* (source of emulation). Khamenei's rise to Supreme Leader was orchestrated by other senior regime officials, most notably his chief ally-turned-rival, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who assumed Khamenei would be weak and easy to control. However, Khamenei's longevity in the position, achieved despite the country careening through a series of economic, diplomatic, and political crises during his tenure, demonstrates that his detractors have consistently underestimated his wiliness and authoritarian instincts.

As Supreme Leader for more than three decades, Khamenei has cemented his standing as one of the two most consequential figures in the history of the Islamic Republic in terms of shaping the country's trajectory at home and on the world stage, the other being Khomeini. In many respects, Khamenei's tenure has been characterized by continuity with Khomeini's hardline, conservative legacy. Khamenei's primary objective as Supreme Leader has been ensuring his own political survival, but stewarding the continued dominion of the revolutionary regime and advancing Khomeinist ideology have been his close secondary priorities in the decades following Khomeini's death.

Khomeini is the preeminent figure in the annals of the Islamic Republic, and his image and influence remain ubiquitous in Iran. More than 40 years after the Islamic Revolution, many of his ardent loyalists from the revolutionary period remain entrenched in the upper echelons of the military, political, and

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clerical elite. His ideology, Khomeinism, continues to serve as the guiding ethos for Khamenei and the revolutionary regime, heavily influencing Khamenei's rhetoric, worldview, and governance.

Khamenei frequently invokes the professed principles of Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution in his public statements. He emphasizes the importance of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamist jurist), advocates for an independent course for Iran (expressed in the slogan "neither East, nor West"), and expresses support for oppressed Muslims against various forms of tyranny, whether it be from capitalist classes, regional monarchies, secular dictatorships, or Western imperialist powers. Khomeini's legacy holds a position of perpetual influence, with Khamenei and the ruling elite making major decisions based on how they believe Khomeini would advise.

The main sources of tension in Iran's political trajectory have revolved around whether the country should pursue accommodation with the West, particularly through limited negotiations over the regime's nuclear program, as a means to protect the regime and the revolution. Influenced by his desire to maintain power at any cost and to govern in line with Khomeini's vision, Khamenei has occasionally entertained engagement with the West, but has ultimately taken a confrontational path.

Khamenei has employed typical strongman tactics to secure his continued rule within Iran's revolutionary regime. One of the hallmarks of Khamenei's reign has been the tightening of restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly, and the press. Under its hybrid authoritarian system with republican elements, the Islamic Republic allows for the existence of limited, controlled dissent as a safety valve to mollify those who wish for more political, cultural, and economic freedoms. Khamenei has provided political space for both hardline and moderate/pragmatic factions to survive and thrive, while retaining ultimate control.

However, the Iranian political arena remains heavily restricted, as participants must demonstrate unwavering loyalty to the revolutionary system. Criticism of Islam, the Islamic Revolution, the revolutionary regime, the Supreme Leader, and the Khomeinist conception of *velayat-e faqih* constitute clear red lines and crossing them are considered seditious acts. Throughout his tenure, Khamenei, known for his thin-skin, has increasingly constricted the boundaries of acceptable dissent, and responded with increasingly brutal suppression of political [protestors](#), labor and [environmental activists](#), and [journalists](#). The regime has also exhibited growing hostility towards the rights of women, [LGBTQ citizens](#), and religious and ethnic minorities.

Another defining characteristic of Khamenei's authoritarian rule has been the establishment of patronage networks among the country's clerical and military elite to ensure their support for his ongoing political survival. As mentioned earlier, power brokers such as Rafsanjani endorsed Khamenei's ascension to the Supreme Leader post, assuming he would be weak and easily controlled. Through the *bonyad* system, Khamenei has co-opted influential clerics, granting them independent power bases and the opportunity to enrich themselves in exchange for their continued loyalty.

In a similar vein, Khamenei has elevated the role of the national security apparatus within Iran. One of the key strategies he pursued immediately after assuming power was to strengthen his ties with the leadership of the [IRGC](#), by making them the most powerful economic force within Iran. Due to his conspiratorial mindset, Khamenei harbors distrust towards both foreign powers and his own population.

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This has led to the development of increasingly symbiotic relations between the Supreme Leader and the security services. Following the highly irregular 2009 elections, during which protestors openly criticized the Supreme Leader and the revolutionary system, Khamenei relied even more on the IRGC and intelligence agencies to suppress the uprising and maintain his legitimacy. A power struggle has emerged between the IRGC and Iran's elected institutions for economic and political dominance, but the IRGC has maintained the upper hand due to Khamenei's support.

Despite being the most powerful figure in Iran according to its constitution, in Western media coverage, Khamenei has generally been overshadowed by the [elected presidents](#) who have served during his tenure, including Rafsanjani (1989-1997), Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), [Hassan Rouhani](#) (2013-2021), and [Ebrahim Raisi](#) (2021-present). This is primarily because Khamenei has [not traveled outside of Iran](#) since becoming Supreme Leader, while the presidents have had a more outwardly public-facing role. The presidents also take a public-facing role in governance, leading them to absorb accountability for the Iranian system's governance failures. Khamenei skillfully deflects blame onto the presidents to shield himself from accountability. He has also intensified his criticism of the presidents when their actions or policies deviated from his preferred direction for the Islamic Republic.

With the exceptions of the hardline and populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, known for his [Holocaust denialism](#) and calls for the [elimination of Israel, as well as Ebrahim Raisi, who has focused on creating a resistance economy and regional economic connections](#), Iran's other presidents during Khamenei's reign have pursued agendas based on domestic reforms and economic engagement with the West. While they remained committed to upholding the revolutionary regime and Khomeinist principles, each president concluded that it was necessary to alleviate repression and create more economic opportunities in order to set the Islamic Revolution on a sustainable path. As Supreme Leader, Khamenei frequently adopted a hedging approach, allowing the presidents space to pursue their agendas, such as Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilizations" or Rouhani's nuclear deal with the P5+1, while simultaneously advocating for resolute resistance. By doing so, Khamenei has protected himself and [his office](#), while leaving the presidents to face the disappointment and bear the blame for unmet expectations.

Hardline allies of Khamenei within the clergy and national security apparatus, keen to protect their economic and political power, have actively undermined efforts towards liberalization and engagement with the West, ensuring that even modest reform aspirations have fallen flat. The failures of these initiatives to deliver tangible benefits have further entrenched Khamenei's conspiratorial and anti-U.S. outlook. All of Iran's presidents have left office discredited and fallen out of favor with the Supreme Leader. Even Ahmadinejad, who was ideologically aligned with Khamenei and has maintained a significant support base within certain segments of the Iranian population, fell out of favor. While Iran has continued on its theocratic and authoritarian trajectory path without interruption, the presidents have been made to shoulder the blame for Iran's continued economic woes and mismanagement and Khamenei remains untarnished.

In recent years, Khamenei has aimed to suppress factionalism and guarantee the dominance of his hardline vision for Iran even after his departure from the scene. Khamenei has filled key positions across Iran with his loyalists, culminating in the rigged [presidential election in June 2021](#), which resulted in the

victory of his ally and potential [successor](#), [Ebrahim Raisi](#). With Raisi's ascension to the presidency, all major power centers in Iran are in the hands of Khamenei and his conservative loyalists.

Life and Career Pre-Islamic Revolution

This resource aims to contextualize Ayatollah Khamenei's role in Iran's emergence as a major source of instability in the Middle East. Motivated by the need for political survival, Khamenei has resisted calls for domestic reform and international cooperation. Despite failing to deliver promised benefits to the citizens of Iran, he has managed to maintain his grip on power in the face of growing unrest, largely by enhancing the role of the IRGC. Among all figures, Khamenei is responsible for Iran's dismal human rights record, economic [corruption and mismanagement](#), [support for terrorism](#) and sectarian conflict, and its pursuit of an illicit nuclear program.

Early Life and Education

Sayyed Ali Khamenei had a deeply religious upbringing and modest economic background before ascending to the highest levels of religious and political power in the Islamic Republic of Iran. He was born on July 16, 1939, in the northeastern Iranian holy city of Mashhad, which is the country's second most populous city and home to the Imam Reza Shrine, a renowned site visited by millions of religious pilgrims each year. Khamenei was the second son among eight children born to a clerical father of Azeri descent. According to his official [biography](#), Khamenei's father, Javad Khamenei, was born and received religious education in Najaf, Iraq, historically the holiest city in Shi'a Islam and the main center of Shi'a scholarship. After completing his religious studies, Khamenei's father settled in Mashhad, although he briefly returned to Najaf for further training. He was recognized as a *mujtahid*, a scholar capable of independent reasoning in interpreting of religious law, and he served as a locally prominent religious educator and public prayer leader who was held in high esteem by the community.

Khamenei describes his father as a devout ascetic, unconcerned with materialistic goods or worldly affairs. He describes his mother as highly educated in religion, history, literature, and poetry, who was dedicated to the education of Khamenei and his siblings. Khamenei tends to romanticize his impoverished upbringing, which was the norm of clerical families at the time. He recalls growing up in a small house with only one-room and a gloomy basement, and his family sometimes had no food but bread and raisins for supper. Despite the economic hardships, Khamenei attributes his early life's enrichment to his close-knit family and their shared love for Islam, literature, and poetry.

Khamenei came of age during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a secular monarch who had close ties with the United Kingdom and the U.S. while showing hostility toward institutionalized religion. Despite the Shah's efforts to modernize the country, Iranians generally retained their religiosity and continued to hold the Shi'a clergy in high esteem. Encouraged by his parents, Khamenei followed in his father's footsteps and entered the seminary after completing his primary education. According to Mehdi Khalaji of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Khamenei became a [cleric at the age of 11](#) and began dressing in clerical garb, which made him stand out and elicited mockery from his peers.

Formative Years

While his primary education focused mainly on traditional religious subjects, at the age of 13, Khamenei underwent a political awakening that led him to adopt Islamism, an ideology that merged politics and Islam, as his guiding principle. During that year, Khamenei attended a speech by the fundamentalist cleric Nawwab Safavi, who was later executed by the Shah's regime for his militant activities. [According](#) to Khamenei, hearing Safavi's "fiery speech against the Shah's anti-Islamic and devious policies" sparked his initial "consciousness concerning Islamic, revolutionary ideas and the duty to fight the Shah's despotism and his British supporters."

The following year, in 1953, a significant event occurred that further intensified Khamenei's hostility toward the West, and the U.S. in particular. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service collaborated with the Shah to launch a [coup](#) against Iran's democratically-elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh. The coup was driven by concerns over the spread of communism and Mosaddegh's push to nationalize Iran's oil industry. Although the initial coup failed, the CIA orchestrated pro-Shah demonstrations that paved the way for his return to power. Mosaddegh was deposed and arrested and replaced with a more compliant prime minister.

The coup against Mosaddegh sparked a widespread anti-U.S., anti-U.K., and anti-imperialist sentiment among the Iranian public, including the clergy and the secular intellectuals. For Khamenei, it was the first major incident coloring his anti-American worldview. The intervention made it clear to him that the U.S. sought to dominate Iran and was hostile to any effort by Iranians to assert their independence or be governed in a truly democratic fashion. Khamenei has maintained these perceptions to the present day and firmly believes that U.S. policy towards Iran is focused on regime change, rather than simply behavior modification.

Khamenei finished his intermediate and advanced religious education in Mashhad and briefly visited Najaf in 1957 to pursue his advanced religious studies. Following his father's wishes, Khamenei attended seminary studies in Qom from 1958 to 1964. It was in Qom, in 1962, that Khamenei first encountered Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who became Khamenei's lifelong spiritual and political guide. According to Khamenei, all of Khomeini's beliefs, worldview, and subsequent actions were the source of his devotion to Khomeini's vision of Islam. At that time, Khomeini was not yet widely known in Iran, but he garnered popularity among the young seminarians in Qom due to his charisma and defiant opposition to the Shah. During this period, Khamenei also formed [bonds](#) with other disciples of Khomeini's revolutionary ideology, including figures like Rafsanjani and the highly conservative cleric Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, who would later become part of the clerical elite and hold senior posts following the Islamic Revolution.

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Khomeini and Khamenei, Source: Khamenei.ir

Under Khomeini's guidance, Khamenei became active in protests against the Shah's rule. Before the 1953 coup that replaced Prime Minister Mosaddegh, the Shah was considered a weak and indecisive leader more interested in womanizing and enjoying a lavish lifestyle than in governance. However, upon his return from exile, he became a more forceful leader, taking steps to sideline the new prime minister and consolidate his executive power. The Shah ruled Iran with an increased sense of purpose and ruthlessness, relying on his heavy-handed intelligence apparatus and secret police to suppress opposition.

During the 1960s, the Shah pursued his signature initiative, known as the White Revolution, which aimed to modernize and overhaul Iran comprehensively. The Shah presented himself as a progressive reformer, aiming to liberate Iran from reactionary forces, particularly the Shi'a clergy. In addition to large-scale infrastructure projects aimed at [industrializing](#) the country and [land reforms](#) intended to break up the wealth and political power of large landowners, the White Revolution focused in large part on reforming education and societal norms in Iran, placing the Shah in direct conflict with the clergy. The Shah's actions, such as promoting an environment of night clubs and what some considered sexual freedom in Tehran and other Iranian cities, granting increased political rights to religious minorities, giving women suffrage and greater educational opportunities, and establishing private universities, were seen as an assault on the privileged status of the clergy and Islam itself, sparking opposition.

The Shi'a clergy, feeling their privileged status and Islamic values under attack, led the opposition to the Shah's program of social, economic, and political reforms. They called on Iranians to resist the imposition of Western cultural influences and instead return to a traditional Islamic identity. Qom served as one of the primary centers of opposition activism, with its seminary students forming the core of the anti-Shah movement. Among the students, Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as the unifying leader of the opposition. Unlike other more quietist senior clerics, who opposed the Shah in rhetoric only, Khomeini viewed it as a religious duty to actively wage revolutionary struggle against the Shah's regime.

Pre-Revolutionary Political Activism

The first signs of unrest between the Shah and Khomeini's supporters emerged in March 1963 when the Shah's agents [violently attacked](#) a protest against his rule at the Fayziyyah seminary in Qom, killing several students. In May 1963, Khomeini tasked Khamenei with [delivering a confidential letter to Shi'a clergymen in Mashhad](#), revealing the true nature of the Shah's regime and its crimes at Fayziyyah. During the same trip, Khamenei was arrested for the first time by the Shah's authorities in the city of Birjand for propagating Khomeini's views. Khamenei spent the night in jail and was ordered not to speak

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out from the pulpit again. According to Khomeini, he realized from that point onward that he would be subject to regular surveillance by the secret police.

In June 1963, Khomeini [delivered a speech](#) at the Fayziyyah seminary in Qom to commemorate the Shi'a holiday of Ashura, a day of mourning that commemorates the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, Hussein, in Karbala. Khomeini's speech marked a turning point in terms of amplifying public and religious opposition to the White Revolution, catalyzing a process that would ultimately lead to the overthrow of the Shah and the victory of the Islamic Revolution. In his speech, Khomeini used religious symbolism, drawing parallels between the Shah and the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, who was seen as an illegitimate usurper. He likened Hussein, the leader of a revolt against Yazid's rule, to himself and called on his followers, as rightful heirs of Hussein's legacy, to follow his example and be willing to sacrifice themselves in the revolutionary cause against the Shah. In fact, thousands of Iranian Shi'a [heeded](#) this political call to action, which derived its potency from the Shi'a commitment to Hussein. Many of them confronted the Shah's military and police forces, and saw their sacrifice for Khomeini's cause as martyrdom.

Khomeini further railed against the Shah's tyrannical rule, his alliances with the U.S. and Israel, and accused him of seeking to destroy Islam and the Shi'a clergy. Simultaneously, an estimated 100,000 of Khomeini's supporters and other anti-Shah activists held a [march](#) in Tehran that ended at the Shah's palace and featured chants of "Death to the Dictator! Death to the Dictator! God save you Khomeini! Death to your bloodthirsty enemy!"

Two days after Khomeini's speech, the Shah's authorities arrested him, sparking nationwide demonstrations in support of Khomeini around the country. Many of his supporters dressed in white shrouds, religiously symbolizing their willingness to be martyred for the cause of revolution against the Shah. The Shah ordered a violent crackdown on the uprising, known as [the 15th of Khordad movement](#), resulting in hundreds of Iranians from various backgrounds losing their lives at the hands of his forces. Khomeini was [arrested](#) for a second time for his activities relating to the uprising, spending 10 days in prison in harsh conditions.

While Khomeini remained under house arrest for eight months, Khomeini and his revolutionary cohort continued to promote the Islamic movement and engage in anti-Shah political activism. In January 1964, Khomeini joined with other members of Khomeini's inner circle and traveled around the country to agitate against the Shah. After delivering speeches in southern Iran opposing a planned referendum on the Shah's reform program, Khomeini was [arrested](#) again by agents of SAVAK, the organization of Iranian intelligence and security. He was transferred to a prison in Tehran known for housing political prisoners, where he spent two months in solitary confinement and faced torture.

In 1964, Khomeini opted to cut short his ongoing seminary education in Qom to return home to Mashhad and care for his ailing father, who had lost sight in one eye. This became a justification for why Khomeini [never obtained the requisite religious credentials](#) to serve as the Supreme Leader under the Islamic Republic's constitution. Because his activities were based out of Mashhad for much of the pre-revolutionary period, it should be noted that Khomeini had less frequent contact with Khomeini and

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was more peripheral to Khomeini's movement than many of the revolutionary clergy based in Qom and Tehran.

During this period, Khamenei began teaching Islamic subjects and continued his revolutionary political activities. He also married his wife, Mansoureh, in 1964 as well. Little is known about Mansoureh, and there are no known photographs of her, as wives of senior regime officials typically avoid the spotlight. In a rare public [interview](#) with a woman's magazine, Mansoureh stated that, marriage did not temper Khamenei's intense revolutionary fervor: "In the first months of our marriage, my husband asked me, 'How would you feel if I was arrested?' I was very upset at first. But he spoke about the clashes, the risks and problems, and how this is the duty of all people, and that convinced me completely." Of her own participation in the revolutionary cause, Mansoureh downplayed her own activism, [saying her primary contribution](#) was "to preserve a calm atmosphere in our home so that he could do his work in peace. I would sometimes visit him in prison without telling him about our problems. Of course, I was also active in distributing pamphlets, carrying messages and hiding documents, but I think [these actions] are not worth mentioning."

Khamenei and his wife have four sons and two daughters: Mostafa, [Mojtaba](#), Masoud, Meysam, Hoda, and Boshra. Khamenei's siblings include Mohammad Khamenei, who later served in parliament; Badri Khamenei, with whom the Supreme Leader had a falling out over her husband's anti-revolutionary activities; Hadi Khamenei, with whom the Supreme Leader has feuded given his reformist tendencies; and Hassan Khamenei, his only non-clerical brother, who later worked in the culture and oil ministries after the revolution.

In the autumn of 1964, the Shah passed a controversial new law that granted U.S. military personnel stationed in Iran immunity from prosecution in Iran. Khomeini strongly opposed this law, viewing it as a violation of Iranian sovereignty and an acceptance of American dominance. Khomeini gave his most fiery speech to date against the new law, calling on religious leaders to unite in resistance to its implementation and the encroachment of Western cultural values. In his speech, he [exhorted](#), "They have reduced the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog. If someone runs over a dog belonging to an American, he will be prosecuted. Even if the Shah himself were to run over a dog belonging to an American, he would be prosecuted. But if an American cook runs over the Shah, or the marja [source of emulation] of Iran, or the highest officials, no one will have the right to object."

Following this speech, the Shah grew impatient with Khomeini but refrained from executing or assassinating him due to fears over the unrest it would provoke. Seeking to curtail his influence within Iran, the Shah opted to rearrest Khomeini and exile him to Turkey. Khomeini would spend 11 months in Turkey, chafing against the society's enforced secularism, before settling in Najaf, [Iraq](#), where he would remain in exile until 1978. While in Iraq, Khomeini taught at seminary, continued evolving his religious and political philosophies, and served as the spiritual and symbolic leader of the anti-Shah movement. In 1970, he published his seminal treatise, *Islamic Government*, in which he renounced the concept of monarchy as un-Islamic and illegitimate, arguing power should be vested with the Shi'a clergy with ultimate decision-making authority in the hands of a Supreme Leader (*velayat-e faqih*). Paradoxically, exile helped Khomeini grow his profile and influence within Iran. Throughout this period, Khomeini's anti-Shah, anti-Western preachments continued to be smuggled into Iran via cassette tapes and other

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media, provoking frequent demonstrations and unrest. According to his official state [biography](#), however, “Imam Khomeini was careful not to publicize his ideas for clerical rule outside of his Islamic network of opposition to the Shah which he worked to build and strengthen over the next decade.”

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, anti-Shah sentiment continued to grow across various sectors of society, with the Shi’a clergy emerging as the most organized element of the opposition. This was largely due to the Islamic network of opposition, built by Khomeini, which operated through mosques, seminaries, and other religious centers. Unlike other nascent civil society institutions, the Shah could not crack down on organized religion without engendering a massive widespread backlash. Consequently, Khomeini and his revolutionary clerics were in the best position to seize control of Iran when the broad-based Iranian Revolution finally occurred in 1979.

During Khomeini’s exile, Khamenei and his fellow clerical backers intensified their opposition to the Shah. However, their struggle extended beyond opposing the Shah. They also sought to increase religiosity in Iranian society and to reform the Qom seminary. Their aim was to enable Khomeini’s young and enthusiastic backers to gain influence at the expense of older, more quietist establishment clerics, thereby orienting Qom in a more revolutionary direction. They concluded it was necessary to act in a more organized fashion to spread their ideology more effectively and to mitigate efforts by the Shah’s authorities to suppress their revolutionary activities.

One such initiative was the formation of a [secret group of eleven young Qom seminarians](#) in 1965, that included Khamenei, his brother, Sayyid Mohammad Khamenei, Hossein-Ali Montazeri, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi. The group aimed to organize revolutionary activities and steer the Qom seminary in a more revolutionary direction. SAVAK discovered the group’s activities in early 1967 and moved to disband it, arresting some members. Khamenei “[was forced to go underground](#)” for a period as a result.

Also contributing to his need to go underground, in 1967, Khamenei served as a translator for a project to secretly publish and distribute the Egyptian Islamist, Sayyid Qutb’s, book, *The Future in Islamic Lands*. Qutb, whose theories formed the ideological framework for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and was the inspiration for Al Qaeda and other Salafi jihadi movements, had been executed the year prior by the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Qutb’s ideas on Islam as the basis of governance factored into the formulation of Ayatollah Khomeini’s theocratic vision as well. In his introduction to the translation, Khamenei [wrote](#), “This lofty and great author has tried in the course of the chapters of this book . . . to first introduce the essence of the faith as it is and then, after showing that it is a program for living . . . [confirm] with his eloquent words and his particular world outlook that ultimately world government shall be in the hands of our school and ‘the future belongs to Islam.’” Recognizing Qutb’s works as a challenge to the Shah’s monarchical rule, SAVAK thwarted the publication of the book and arrested those behind the clandestine effort, but Khamenei was able to evade arrest at the time.

Several months later, however, Khamenei attended the funeral of a local ayatollah in Mashhad and alerted to his presence, SAVAK agents arrested him yet again. Khamenei spent three months in prison before being released. Upon his release, he immediately resumed organized revolutionary activities, traveling around the country to hold meetings and give sermons from the pulpit in order to recruit and

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train new revolutionaries – mainly, but not exclusively, among the clergy and university students – into Khomeini’s ideology and movement.

Khamenei differed from his fellow clerical counterparts in that while Islam and Islamism were his guiding lights, he also had a more [cosmopolitan outlook](#). Khamenei drew inspiration from music, poetry, and novels, including from the Western canon, in addition to Islamic legal texts. As part of his revolutionary outreach, Khamenei interfaced with intellectuals and political groups from various walks of life, finding common ground where possible. Since the overthrow of Mosaddegh in 1953, Iran’s intelligentsia was fairly united in opposition to the U.S. and the Shah. Meeting with leading secular intellectuals and reading novels such as the *Grapes of Wrath* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which shed light on systemic problems such as racism and wealth inequality afflicting the U.S., helped Khamenei sharpen his anti-U.S., anti-imperialist critiques. He fused these ideas with his faith in Islam and Islamism to arrive at a synthesis whereby Islam would serve as the basis for a rising independent Third World to be liberated from American and Zionist dominance. While Khamenei was influenced by and willing to instrumentally make common cause with non-Islamic factions opposed to the Shah, after the broad-based Iranian Revolution in 1979, Khomeini and his revolutionary cohort would quickly turn against and move to repress their erstwhile allies-of-convenience.

Over the next several years following his 1967 arrest, Khamenei continued traveling around Iran, giving sermons and holding meetings promoting Khomeini’s ideology and opposition to the Shah. These revolutionary activities led to more encounters with SAVAK and subsequent arrests. In June 1970, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Mohsen Hakim, who was at the time the main *marja-e-taghlid* (source of emulation) from the Najaf seminary and thus influential among the majority of Shi’a Muslims, passed away. Khamenei advocated for Imam Khomeini to replace him, but a different successor was chosen. As part of this advocacy, Khamenei was [imprisoned](#) for a few months, in September 1970, for publishing and distributing pamphlets supporting Khomeini and criticizing the Shah. SAVAK charged Khamenei with following Khomeini as his source of emulation and subscribing to his political beliefs. Khamenei’s speeches and published works insulted the Shah, who [concluded](#), “Hence, he has committed treason.” Khamenei was ordered not to return to the pulpit upon his release. Still, he continued preaching Khomeini’s vision of revolutionary Islamism, inspiring youth around the country to undertake anti-Shah activism. This led to three more arrests for Khamenei in 1971.

Undeterred, Khamenei continued teaching, holding meetings, and preaching, moving from mosque to mosque in an effort to stay one step ahead of SAVAK. Anti-Shah sentiment continued to grow throughout the country during this period. From January to August 1975, he was imprisoned again in Tehran at a prison euphemistically called the Joint Anti-Sabotage Committee, enduring the harshest conditions behind bars yet. His family was not informed of his whereabouts, and he was denied visitors throughout his stint. One of his cellmates, a communist dissident, [recalled](#) Khamenei “as a kindly if austere man, gentle enough to feed one of his fellow-prisoners after a torture session. Khamenei would read the Quran aloud and sob, lost in the words of the Prophet, or simply peer at the sky through the bars of his cell.” Nothing about Khamenei’s mild-mannered nature indicated he possessed the ruthless ambition and political instincts needed to eventually amass and maintain absolute power in Iran.

The Anti-Shah Revolutionary Movement

While Khamenei was in prison, the anti-Shah movement continued gathering steam, leading to a small-scale uprising that presaged the Islamic Revolution. In March 1975, the Shah [reversed his earlier gestures towards political liberalization](#). Initially, he had allowed the formation of two political parties, one of which was nominally an opposition party. After the opposition party contested and won a parliamentary by-election, the Shah decided he could not abide the appearance of dissent and abruptly moved to dissolve both parties. In their stead, he created a single political party called the Resurgence Party, which became the only legal party in Iran. While membership was not mandatory, the Shah clarified that non-allegiance to the Resurgence Party was treason. From exile in Iraq, Khomeini declared the new party un-Islamic and stated that public participation was *haram* (religiously forbidden) for Muslims.

As anger against the Shah grew due to his attempts to manipulate the limited political space that existed for Iranians, the students at the Fayziyyah seminary in Qom planned [major pro-Khomeini, anti-Shah demonstrations](#) that year to commemorate the June 1963 15th Khordad uprising. The Shah's security forces were prepared, and on the evening of June 5, 1975, they surrounded the seminary, preventing students from chanting pro-Khomeini slogans (public mentions of Khomeini had been banned in Iran since his exile over a decade prior) and exiting the building to take their protest to the streets. The trapped students, aided by sympathetic townspeople outside the seminary who rallied to their cause, clashed with the Shah's agents, facing assaults by tear gas and water cannons. A standoff ensued, prompting the Shah's security forces to call military reinforcements to pacify the uprising. The students called upon local religious leaders to mediate, but the quietist clergymen, concerned about losing the Shah's religious protections, urged the pro-Khomeini students to stand down.

On June 7, the Shah's forces cleared the area outside the seminary of townspeople and launched an assault on the student protestors inside. The military and security agents beat the students, armed only with sticks and stones, for over an hour and made over 200 arrests, finally quelling the uprising. During the melee, the Shah's forces caused significant damage inside the seminary, breaking all the building's windows and doors. There were no fatalities among the students, but rumors of multiple deaths and brutality by the Shah's forces spread, increasing anger at the Shah.

The Shah reacted strongly to the 1975 15th Khordad riots, [blaming](#) the "ugly and filthy" unrest on an "unholy union of stateless reds and black reactionaries," an attempt to discredit Khomeini's followers by linking them to communist subversion. According to the contemporaneous diaries of one of his advisors, the Shah had thought at the time that Khomeini was no longer relevant in Iran. Upon hearing his name shortly before the riots, the Shah [retorted](#), "Khomeini? No one mentions his name any more in Iran, except, perhaps, the terrorists." The Shah's dismissive attitude towards Khomeini until the riots indicated that he was out of touch with Iranian society and lacked an accurate sense of the growing opposition against his rule.

By the time of the 1975 riots, the fissures that had emerged in Iran and led to the initial 1963 15th Khordad uprising had intensified. The Shah's White Revolution had aimed to rapidly modernize the country's economy and social norms, but the jarring pace of change imperiled the livelihoods and traditional ways of life for broad swathes of the population, engendering significant reaction. Booming

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oil revenues had generated substantial wealth for the most educated and well-connected, forming a *nouveau riche* class of elite businessmen, bankers, and oil brokers who gravitated toward ostentatious, Western lifestyles. The fruits of the oil boom were unevenly distributed, however, and many Iranians were left behind due to poor planning and lack of foresight by the Shah, who boasted of his [disdain for the expertise of technocrats](#).

The influx of petrodollars into Iran, especially after a price spike in 1974, led to a rapid rise in inflation. In stark contrast with the conspicuous consumption of the elite, [60 percent of the Iranian population lived on subsistence wages](#). They lacked the necessary skills and training to participate in the emerging modernized economy and faced housing shortages and food insecurity. The [land reform policies](#) of the White Revolution were an attempt by the Shah to co-opt the peasantry and inoculate them against the lure of communism. The government sold small subdivided tracts of land at affordable prices, but only a small percentage of the peasantry could take advantage of the opportunity. As a result, millions of peasants and agrarian laborers were pushed to the outskirts of large cities, where they became disaffected as they struggled to acclimate to urban life and make ends meet. This underclass of dislocated urban migrants would form a core constituency among Khomeini's Islamic revolutionaries.

Meanwhile, banking and commerce reform threatened the economic and political power of the bazaar and merchant class, who operated largely informally and chafed against efforts to impose regulation and central authority. The bazaaris' shops were historically concentrated in dense alleyways surrounding mosques, seeking to draw in customers from those going to and from the mosques, which served as the focal points of communal life and political organization. The Shah's attempts to create a centrally planned economy and impose price control measures, which cut into their profits, drove the bazaaris into a [tactical alliance](#) with the Shi'a clergy. Both groups tapped into local mosques to recruit and politically mobilize against the Shah.

The rapid pace of social and economic change, widening inequality, and erosion of traditional ways of life created conditions ripe for revolution. Khomeini and his revolutionary cohort of Shi'a clergy blamed the Shah's modernization program and Western-style capitalism more generally for Iran's systemic corruption, social licentiousness, inequality, and political repression. This critique resonated strongly with marginalized Iranians. Khomeini and his allies pitched a return to Islam and tradition as the antidote to the alienation many felt. This message even appealed to disaffected elites who lacked spiritual fulfillment despite their material wealth. A growing trend toward religiosity had taken root, most visibly witnessed by an increase in veiling by women, increased mosque attendance, and an uptick in religious pilgrimages to Shi'a holy sites, serving as a direct rebuke of the Shah's modernization agenda.

The 1975 15th Khordad riots were the first major sign that these emerging trends had created fault lines leading to increased violence and unrest against the Shah in the future. The Shah and his inner circle of advisors took the July 1975 riots as a wake-up call, realizing that Khomeini and his backers could not be easily dismissed as irrelevant or backward reactionaries. Having ransacked the Fayziyyah seminary, the seat of revolutionary clerical fervor, the Shah's authorities [shut it down](#) entirely as a show of state power. Following the uprising, the Shah began imploring Saddam Hussein, Iraq's de facto strongman leader, who had started a campaign of repression against Iraq's majority Shi'a population out of fears of

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an uprising, to [expel Khomeini from Iraq](#). The Shah hoped that this action would weaken Khomeini's growing influence in Iran.

However, these steps were not enough to quell the rising tide of Islamism. While the Shah effectively suppressed nationalist and communist secular opposition, he could not fully stamp out religious-oriented opposition centered around fiery sermons and mass processions. This was due to the potential backlash from an increasingly religious and traditional population. The space to organize and mobilize through mosques, with the assistance of the bazaari networks, was a crucial factor in why Khomeini's Islamist backers were the best positioned to shape the future contours of the Iranian state. Ayatollah Khomeini had succeeded in building the ideological and theological structure for a state built on Islamist values and governance in the preceding years. He had also cultivated clerical networks to disseminate his ideology in communities nationwide, laying the groundwork for revolution. While Khomeini built the ideological and organizational frameworks for revolution, ultimately, the Shah's increased repression, coupled with non-responsiveness to demands for reform and an economic downturn, was the catalyst for his own overthrow.

In August 1975, Khamenei was released from prison after enduring his most challenging sentence to date. He emerged into an increasingly restive Iran that had entered a new phase while he was behind bars. Despite increased surveillance by the Shah's intelligence agents and a prohibition against him from giving public sermons or speeches, teaching, or even holding classes on Quranic exegesis at his home, Khamenei risked further imprisonment and torture to carry on his intellectual and revolutionary activities in secret from his home base of Mashhad. He continued giving underground speeches against the regime and holding discussions with secular and religious students to further Khomeinist precepts and inculcate revolutionary anti-Shah sentiment. During this period, in 1977, Khamenei and other conservative revolutionary clerical backers of Khomeini created the Association of Combatant Clergy, an umbrella group for recruiting and organizing the activities of anti-Shah clergy around the country that still exists in Iran as a quasi-political party for hardliner, or principlist, clergy.

Later-revealed SAVAK documents [showed](#) that the Shah's authorities were aware of Khamenei's activities and actively sought to infiltrate his meetings to gather evidence against him and other activists in his circle during this period. According to SAVAK's files on Khamenei's revolutionary activities:

"Khamenei is an intellectual, a mujtahid, and a teacher at a high level at the Seminary of Qom, who is familiar with social issues and today's cultural tools. He has been involved in political activities since 1962, instigating an uprising among the people. He was involved in 15 Khordad and encouraged religious zealots and naïve students to join in activities against national security. He has translated several books. He is an expert speaker, has a warm personality, is liked by the youth, and is an individual that socializes with all social classes. He has recently changed the manner of his political activities. He expresses his views through teachings, and interpretations of tafsīr (Quranic exegesis), ḥadīth and Qur'anic verses in a revolutionary and anti-regime tone. ... His activities lead students and religious zealots to anti-government activities. He absolutely rejects the current government and its principles, and insists on the establishment of an Islamic system. He is considered Khomeini's representative and a follower of his doctrines and ideology. ... We are confident that he is Khomeini's representative."

The Final Phase of the Shah

The final phase of the Shah's reign began in October 1977, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini's 49-year-old son and most trusted aide, Mostafa, in Najaf. Mostafa's death occurred six months after the death of Ali Shariati under suspicious circumstances in the United Kingdom. Shariati was an intellectual from Mashhad, well-known to Khamenei, who fused Marxist and Islamic thought and was considered one of the leading ideologues of the Islamic Revolution. SAVAK was widely suspected of having played a role in both untimely deaths. Ayatollah Khomeini was [content not to push back against such conspiracy theories](#) as they facilitated further anger toward the Shah and played into the notion of martyrdom at the hands of a tyrant. According to an Iranian state media account, Khomeini "was so absorbed in the path of the Ahl al-Bayt that he considered the martyrdom of his elder son Ayatollah Seyyed Mostafa Khomeini in 1977 in Iraq at the hands of the Shah's secret service SAVAK, as a matter decreed by Allah. The Imam had offered his own personal sacrifice to the cause of the Islamic Revolution." Following Mostafa's death, Khomeini penned a letter to the Iranian people which Time Magazine referred to as "[the crucial document of the revolution.](#)" Beyond the usual denunciations of the Shah, Khomeini declared "it is the responsibility of the Iranian army and its heads to liberate their country from destruction," establishing himself as the de facto leader of the revolution by making the first call for Iran's armed forces to overthrow the Shah.

Mostafa Khomeini's death created a no-win situation for the Shah. Ayatollah Khomeini's representatives requested permission to hold memorial vigils at mosques around the country following the customary 40-day mourning period. Denying Khomeini's supporters the right to assemble and grieve collectively would have triggered a backlash. However, the Shah feared allowing such assemblies would also be an opportunity for organizing and demonstrations. The Shah decided to allow the vigils but admonished his security services to quell the unrest if demonstrations spilled out from the mosques onto the streets. Khomeini's supporters took full advantage of the Shah's temporary leniency to bolster Khomeini's clerical and revolutionary legitimacy. According to SAVAK official Perviz Sabeti, considered the public face of the Shah's security apparatus, "[The forty-day mourning period was the time when the Khomeini people really got organized.](#)"

Initially, Khomeini's followers published a notice of mourning in the newspaper *Kayhan*, referring to Mostafa as "the offspring of the Exalted Leader of all Shiites of the world." Sensing an opening, several hundred prominent *ulama*, including Khamenei, sent [condolence telegrams](#) to Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf. Revolutionary activists held memorial services for Mostafa Khomeini around the country, including one organized by Khamenei in Mashhad. During the prominent memorial service in Tehran, the presiding cleric prayed for "[our one and only leader, the defender of the faith and the great combatant of Islam, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini.](#)" This exhortation broke the 14-year taboo against speaking Khomeini's name publicly and electrified those in attendance, who responded with chants of "Allahu Akbar." The reverberations of these actions quickly spread. Leftist opponents of the Shah tactically aligned with Khomeini and published open letters supporting Mostafa.

The outpouring of support from varied constituencies convinced Ayatollah Khomeini that revolution had never been closer, and militant revolutionary cells formed by the Association of Combatant Clergy and the Coalition of Islamic Societies, a similar Khomeinist organizational vehicle, mobilized. Throughout

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November and December 1977, militant Khomeini backers carried out acts of sabotage against the regime, targeting symbols of the Shah's modernization program and ties to the West, including cinemas, synagogues, centers catering to women's health and literacy, and businesses affiliated with Americans, Jews, and Baha'is.

The Shah had entered 1977 with pledges to liberalize and improve Iran's human rights record, due to a renewed emphasis by President Jimmy Carter on human rights among U.S. allies. At the beginning of the year, moderate opposition elements began testing the waters by publishing open letters critical of the Shah and hosting protest meetings and poetry readings that did not lead to arrests or harassment. This atmosphere of leniency emboldened Khomeini's backers to ramp up their provocations and eventually engage in militant activities. While facing mounting unrest after Mostafa Khomeini's death, the Shah met with President Carter in Washington, D.C., in mid-November 1977. According to the Shah's final autobiography, the meetings went well, and the subject of [human rights was barely breached](#). Feeling confident that he had earned Carter's unconditional backing, the Shah again turned to repression, using heavy-handed tactics to crack down against even peaceful protest and the increased militancy by Khomeinist and leftist opposition.

One measure the Shah took to suppress dissent was sending revolutionary activists into internal exile. On December 14, 1977, the Shah's agents raided Khamenei's home in Mashhad, arrested him, and transferred him for an intended three-year sentence to Iranshahr in Sistan-Baluchestan province, a remote and abjectly impoverished area in southeastern Iran. Despite the hardships of exile and separation from his family and fellow activists, Khamenei later claimed that his faith in Khomeinism helped him weather this period peacefully. In a documentary featured on the Supreme Leader's website covering this period of Khamenei's life, Khamenei [insists](#), "Everyone feels homesick while away from home and friends. But I did not feel homesick in 1978 or 1979."

While in internal exile, Khamenei made the most of his situation by developing warm relations with locals in the predominantly Sunni Baluchestan region. He preached Khomeinist precepts and helped spread the flames of revolution to this remote corner of Iran. His growing popularity in the area again placed him on the radar of intelligence agents, culminating in his relocation to a more remote town in Kerman province in August 1978. Undeterred, he continued speaking out against the Shah and played a role in the local outbreak of demonstrations, which was not yet common in smaller towns.

Despite being on the periphery, Khamenei claims in his [official biography](#) that he maintained correspondence with his networks of activists and clerics during this period and was still a part of major decision-making by Khomeini's backers. However, he was largely absent from the events that culminated in the revolution. On January 7, 1978, Iran's main semi-official newspaper published an article, [reportedly at the behest of the Shah](#), that was highly insulting toward Khomeini. The decision to attack, rather than continuing to ignore, Khomeini demonstrated that the Shah was concerned by the growth in religious opposition to his rule. The article, entitled "Iran and Red and Black Colonialism," accused Khomeini, a revered *marja* to his backers, of being nothing more than a fraudulent mouthpiece for communist (red) and reactionary religious (black) forces who sought to bring down the Shah in order to subjugate the Iranian nation. The pseudonymous author claimed Khomeini was Indian, not Iranian, and had financial backing from British imperialists who sought to colonize Iran.

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When word of the insulting article reached Qom on the evening of January 7, it set off several days of violent protests. Khomeini's backers rioted in downtown Qom, setting alight newsstands carrying the offending article and attacking businesses, banks, and government offices. By nightfall on January 9, a mob of 20,000 had taken over the streets, with many chanting "[Death to the Shah!](#)" for the first time, a cry that would become an increasingly common refrain during the last year of the Pahlavi era. When the crowd tried to overrun a police station, officers fired into the crowd from rooftops, killing at least six. The unrest was only pacified when army units were called to restore order.

The newspaper incident and subsequent Qom protest marked the point when the religious-based opposition to the Shah decisively became the leading oppositional force. Increasingly convinced that a victorious revolution was afoot, Khomeini [declared](#) after the suppression of the Qom protests, "To the noble nation of Iran, I bring tidings that the despotic regime of the shah is drawing its last breaths." Unrest spread to cities around Iran while those in Qom undertook the traditional 40-day mourning period for those killed in the protest. According to Iran expert [Nikki Keddie](#), "The ulama and bazaar leadership, sensing their new power and the grievances of their constituency, helped in 1978 to organize massive memorial demonstrations for those killed in previous incidents, taking place at traditional forty-day religious intervals. Here was a brilliant example of political use of Shi'i traditions; the government would risk truly massive demonstrations if it outlawed traditional mourning gatherings occurring at the proper and traditional intervals... In addition, the forty-day interval gave an excellent hiatus to regroup forces, spread the word orally, ...and to utilize spontaneous or ritual emotion to intensify opposition to the regime."

As the cycle of protests, suppression, and mourning periods continued throughout the spring and summer of 1978, Khomeini issued sporadic proclamations. He praised the opposition for their steadfastness and called for the end of the Shah's rule and the establishment of an Islamic government in Iran. In addition to calls of "Death to the Shah," protestors more routinely began chanting Khomeini's name, displaying banners with his visage, and demanding his return from exile, highlighting his role as the pivotal figure in the growing protest movement. During these months, the Shah took multiple steps to assuage popular opinion, such as replacing the head of SAVAK and promising more liberalization. However, it was not sufficient to stem the revolutionary tide.

The Shah realized the situation had become untenable during several days of protest centered in Tehran to mark Eid al-Fitr, the festival signifying the end of Ramadan, in early September 1978. The anti-Shah demonstrations, spearheaded by Khomeini's backers, began peacefully, aside from familiar provocative chants on September 4. As an initial crowd of 15,000 religious demonstrators marched through Tehran's commercial district, thousands of onlookers from all walks of life joined in, creating a throng of an estimated 200,000 people chanting religious and revolutionary slogans and praying en masse. A festive, carnival-like atmosphere pervaded, with many marchers [handing flowers to army soldiers](#) posted along the parade route to defuse potential tensions. While many demonstrators had no explicit religious affiliations, the Khomeinist clerics were the clear leaders, and the pervasive expressions of revolutionary sentiment carried clear religious undertones.

While the first day of major protests in Tehran passed without incident, smaller demonstrations throughout the country were marred by reports of clashes with authorities and small numbers of

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protestors killed. By September 7, the protests in Tehran took on a more ominous tone. That day, thousands of Khomeini backers again thronged to the streets, chanting “death to the Shah,” with the men dressed in white garbs to signify their willingness to be martyred. Increasingly alarmed by the growing mobs calling for his head, the Shah declared martial law that evening to quell the movement growing into a potential insurrection. Undeterred and largely unaware of the late-night declaration, a mass of protestors set out again on the morning of September 8, converging on Jaleh Square, a modest Tehran traffic circle. As the massive, overflowing crowd listened to blistering speeches denouncing the Shah and calling for establishing an Islamic government, the army, and police ordered the protestors to disperse. A bloody crackdown with live fire ensued, with [at least 80 protestors gunned down](#) by the Shah’s authorities.

The massacre, which became known as Black Friday, marked the death knell of any chance for accommodation between the Shah and his opposition and is widely regarded as the point of no return for the Iranian Revolution. Privately, the Shah was [shocked](#) and crestfallen to witness the widespread animus of the protestors directed at him personally, believing that while Iranians were dissatisfied with the government and bureaucracy, they revered him and the institution of monarchy more generally. He resolved during the protests that he would soon go into exile and pass on governance to a caretaker until his son came of age and was ready to assume the throne.

As civil unrest peaked in Iran, the Shah’s grip on power was loosening. On September 23, 1978, after serving only eight months of his three-year exile sentence, Khomeini’s internal exile suddenly ended, and he [returned to Mashhad](#). He immediately resumed organizing revolutionary demonstrations and public speeches against the Shah in favor of Khomeini’s return from exile and establishing an Islamic government.

Shortly thereafter, the Shah once again pleaded with Saddam Hussein to banish Ayatollah Khomeini from Najaf in order to destroy his base of operations. Wary of Khomeini’s influence with Shi’a Iraqis and of potential internal unrest should the Shah fall next door, Hussein complied. After failing to find an Arab state that would provide refuge and permit him to carry on his political activities, one of his allies, an exiled leftist opposition figure named Abolhassan Banisadr, arranged for Khomeini to settle in Paris, where he arrived on October 6, 1978. The Shah’s last-ditch effort to neutralize Khomeini backfired, as he no longer faced any restrictions on speaking freely against the monarch. Living in Paris granted Khomeini greater access to the international news media, and he rapidly became a frequently profiled subject of fascination, allowing his messages to penetrate Iranian society to a greater extent than ever before.

However, Khomeini’s communications from Paris belied his true intentions to install a theocracy in Iran. Banisadr and his team of advisors in Paris were skilled in the arts of public and media relations, and they [shrewdly counseled Khomeini](#) to avoid revealing his devotion to the principles laid out in *Islamic Government* or speaking out too forcefully against the United States. Khomeini claimed he sought an Islamic Republic in the same sense that France was a French Republic, emphasizing his commitment to democracy and women’s rights. He stated that once the Shah was deposed, he would leave politics to politicians and live the rest of his days in a seminary in Qom. His claims were a balm to leftist and secularist opponents of the Shah, who saw the tactical need to align with Khomeini but feared the ultimate implications of clerical rule. Western media and intellectuals were hoodwinked, too, with many

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viewing Khomeini as a mystic, enlightened revolutionary. Khomeini's deceptions made him more palatable as the central figure directing the umbrella group of anti-Shah forces.

The Iranian Revolution was in full swing during the fall and winter of 1978-1979, with new population segments joining the ranks of implacable opposition to the Shah's continued rule. Although martial law was technically in effect, protests and demonstrations continued growing, and Iranians became increasingly fearless and enthusiastic. They were undeterred by the haphazard enforcement of martial law and increasingly angered and emboldened by the occasions when authorities did move to suppress dissent. Encouraged by leftist and religious opposition leaders, a massive labor strike movement closed schools, airports, steel mills, and industrial complexes and caused a significant decline in Iran's oil output. As billions of dollars of capital fled Iran, the Shah's Western allies prepared for the fall of the monarchy.

In early November 1978, an effort backed by the Shah to broker a national unity government that included opposition elements [collapsed](#) due to Khomeini's defiant refusal from France to make any accommodations with the Shah's regime, believing the monarchy and Iran's constitution to have surrendered all legitimacy. Khomeini instead called on his backers to demonstrate until the Shah fell. This call led to two days of protests on November 4 and 5, in which hundreds of thousands of Iranians participated around the country, with the most notable protests taking place at Tehran University. As the situation intensified, the Shah's troops fired automatic weapons into the crowd, killing several students. Enraged, a mob of students spilled out from campus and tore through Tehran's commercial district, burning banks, theaters, and other businesses and attacking foreigners they encountered in hotels and restaurants.

On November 6, 1978, Iran's prime minister, who had led the efforts to establish a unity government, resigned in protest against the army's use of force. The military, which had resented having its hands tied when enforcing martial law, implored the Shah to appoint a military government. At noon that day, the Shah broadcast his last speech to the Iranian public, announcing the formation of a military government intended to restore calm while he implemented liberalizing reforms, paving the way to free elections. The Shah's speech was a last-ditch plea to Iran's opposition forces to allow him to oversee the transition to a new, more democratic government. However, it was also essentially an admission of defeat. For the first time, the Shah acknowledged the organized but piecemeal demonstrations that had gripped Iran in recent years as a revolution: "[I heard the voice of your revolution...as Shah of Iran, as well as an Iranian citizen, I cannot but approve your revolution,](#)" he said. The speech alerted the Shah's allies that he had very little fight left in him, and many began making hasty preparations to vacate Iran.

Immediately following the imposition of a military government helmed by the moderate General Gholam-Reza Azhari, the Shah tried to appease his opponents by arresting several regime officials on corruption charges, including a former head of SAVAK. From Paris, Khomeini remained steadfast in his opposition to any accommodation with the Shah's regime. Responding to the contradiction between the promises of liberalization and the imposition of military governance, Khomeini [declared](#), "In one hand, the Shah held out a letter of repentance for his crimes, but in the other he held out a bayonet and a gun. Until the day an Islamic republic is installed the struggle of our people will continue." He also railed against the U.S., which he saw as now effectively controlling Iran due to its role in training and advising

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the Shah's armed forces. He pledged enmity toward the U.S. until it dropped its hostility toward his Islamic movement and called for Iranian soldiers to join the side of the people and turn against the Shah.

The military government restored calm briefly, but Khomeini would again harness the power of Shi'a symbolism to mount a final offensive against the Shah. The holy month of Muharram, during which the Ashura day of mourning for the martyrdom of Hussein takes place, was set to begin on December 2, 1978, and Khomeini called for broad-based demonstrations against the Shah all month. On November 23, Khomeini recorded a [declaration for Muharram](#) that was distributed through his mosque networks in Iran: "With the approach of Moharram, we are about to begin the epic month of heroism and self-sacrifice, the month in which blood triumphed over the sword, the month in which truth condemned falsehood for all eternity and branded the mark of disgrace upon the forehead of all oppressors and satanic governments, the month that has taught successive generations throughout history the path of victory over the dagger [or knife]."

Fearing the worst, the Azhari military government banned mass processions during Muharram but relented to avoid street clashes. On the first day of Muharram, December 2, hundreds of thousands of Iranians gathered at Shahyad Square (now Azadi, or Freedom Square), a monument to the Shah's modernization program, calling for the Shah's ouster. The largest demonstrations occurred on December 10 and 11, the day preceding Ashura and Ashura. An estimated [two million people](#) participated in demonstrations in Tehran, representing 40 percent of the city's population. Six to nine million people were estimated to have taken part in demonstrations throughout Iran out of a population at the time of 32 million people. Khomeini delivered a revolutionary Night of Ashura sermon in Mashhad and organized the city's rally on Ashura itself.

The Ashura protests were explicitly political, and the chants – ["We will kill Iran's dictator!"](#) ["Death to the American establishment!"](#) ["The Shah and his family must be killed!"](#) ["We will destroy Yankee power in Iran!"](#) ["Arms for the people!"](#) ["This American king should be hanged!"](#) ["Shah, if you don't get the message, you'll get it from the barrel of a machine gun!"](#) – reflected the growing Iranian religiosity and xenophobia egged on by Khomeini. Despite the tensions, however, the protests remained mostly peaceful. The massive Ashura demonstrations effectively broke the backs of the Shah's military forces and sapped their will to confront their fellow citizens violently.

Following the demonstrations, it was clear that the Shah's grip on power was rapidly slipping. The U.S. began maneuvering to safeguard its presence in Iran after the Shah left. The U.S. ambassador to Iran, William Sullivan, pursued a plan behind the scenes to have Mehdi Bazargan, a staunchly anticommunist nationalist leader with Islamist leanings, form a government with Khomeini's backing. U.S. intelligence assessments at the time completely misjudged the nature of the threat Khomeini, the extremely political and radical Shi'a cleric, posed to American interests in Iran. One such assessment assured the White House that Khomeini had ["no interest in holding power himself."](#) According to author Andrew Scott Cooper's *The Fall of Heaven*, which provides a comprehensive account of the events leading up to the Islamic Revolution, the CIA "still seemed unaware of Khomeini's 1970 *velayat-e faqih* thesis, even though it was openly for sale on Tehran street corners." Knowing he was being surveilled in Paris, Khomeini was careful in phone conversations to counsel against his followers attacking Americans, fooling the CIA into believing "that Khomeini was a moderating influence over the leftists and radicals in

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his entourage,” according to Cooper. Unbeknownst to the Americans, Khomeini’s “plan was always to stockpile weapons and restrain the Mujahedin guerrilla fighters (loyal to him) until the Shah left Iran. Only then would they launch the final offensive that would take advantage of the army’s disoriented, leaderless state to overthrow the regime.”

Events began unraveling very quickly following the Ashura demonstrations. Spurred on by Khomeini, growing numbers of soldiers [defected](#) and joined with the revolutionaries. Americans and other foreigners made their judgments of the political situation and sought to leave Iran en masse; those who stayed were targeted in sporadic incidents of mob violence. On December 24, 1978, a group of rioting high schoolers [converged](#) on the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, prompting Marines on duty to fire tear gas to prevent them from breaching the compound, a portent of future events. On December 27, as violence raged in Tehran, martial law collapsed, and the military government of Azhari was disbanded. Two days later, the Shah appointed Shapour Bakhtiar, a vocal opponent of the Shah from the nationalist National Front faction, as Prime Minister. Bakhtiar’s faction [denounced](#) the move, as they were beyond seeking accommodation with the Shah and had, at this point, allied with Khomeini, leaving Bakhtiar as a leader with no constituency. The U.S., seeking to elevate Mehdi Bazargan, also opposed the appointment, viewing Bakhtiar as a doomed [nonentity](#).

Khomeini’s Return from Exile

On January 6, 1979, Bakhtiar announced the formation of a new cabinet, and the Shah announced that as soon as the parliament approved Bakhtiar’s government, he planned to leave Iran indefinitely. Khomeini denounced Bakhtiar’s government as illegal and in an act of defiance that reflected his confidence that victory was imminent, formed a shadow government, the Islamic Revolutionary Council, whose membership was largely kept secret in the early phases of the revolution. In 1980, 13 original members were [identified](#). The Council was meant to carry out Khomeini’s will and oversee revolutionary affairs in anticipation of his return to Iran from exile. The Council also began laying the groundwork for a provisional Islamic government to take power that would serve as a transitional step in establishing an Islamic republic.

The formation of the Council was a seminal event in Khomeini’s career trajectory. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, an ally of Khomeini since the early 1960s when they tried to orient the Qom seminary in a Khomeinist direction, was at this point one of Khomeini’s most trusted advisors. At Rafsanjani’s suggestion, Khomeini approved of Khomeini’s addition to the Council. By Khomeini’s admission, his ascension to the Islamic Revolutionary Council [was a surprise](#), elevating him from a committed but peripheral revolutionary into Khomeini’s inner circle. Khomeini left Mashhad and headed to Tehran to serve on the Islamic Revolutionary Council in mid-January 1979. According to Khomeini’s official [biography](#), the Council conducted backchannel negotiations with Pahlavi officials and contacted foreign diplomats, including Americans, to facilitate a transition. The Americans contacted the Council because the Carter administration did not see a feasible way to stop the Khomeinist opposition. So it hoped to preserve its Iranian interests by supporting more moderate elements and encouraging Khomeini to lessen his anti-American rhetoric.

Khomeini and his cohort, including several hundred *fedayeen* who had trained in Palestinian and Amal training camps in Lebanon during his exile, had [planned several years of possible struggle](#), expecting

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elements of the armed forces to remain loyal to the government. To their surprise, on January 16, the Shah, who had secretly been battling lymphoma since 1973, left Iran for Egypt. Although he never officially abdicated the throne, he would never return to Iran. While Khomeini's circle of advisors remained anxious that they would face resistance from Pahlavi holdovers, Khomeini decided that now was the time to return to Iran. The Islamic Revolutionary Council formed a welcoming committee, which Khamenei was a member of, to ensure and organize Khomeini's repatriation.

Prime Minister Bakhtiar, who had been left in charge following the Shah's desertion, [agreed to let Khomeini return to the country](#) in order to stave off potential unrest but warned him and his clerical backers that they must accept the central government's authority even though they were aware of his plan to immediately establish a [provisional Islamic government](#). Bakhtiar had a last-minute change of heart and offered to resign to delay Khomeini's arrival. He also promised to hold a referendum within four months to allow Iranians to decide whether they preferred Khomeini's Islamic republic or the continuation of the constitutional monarchy that was his favored path. Khomeini, who had all the leverage in the situation, refused to negotiate with Bakhtiar.

In a last-ditch gambit, Bakhtiar closed Iran's airports, giving rise to allegations that he was trying to prevent Khomeini from returning on January 26, as he intended. Bakhtiar denied them, and claimed that the ayatollah "was free to come [to Iran]." Iranian radio said airport worker strikes had forced the closure. Still, this decision triggered protests and additional strikes throughout the country, including a large sit-in organized by Khamenei and other revolutionary clergy at Tehran University's mosque. The pressure led to Bakhtiar's capitulation, and on February 1, 1979, Khomeini returned to Tehran on an Air France 747, where he was greeted by several hundred international journalists and hundreds of thousands of ecstatic Iranians lining his procession route from the airport to Tehran's city center.

While Bakhtiar was nominally still in charge, Khomeini was the true power broker from the moment he arrived in Iran. On the day of his arrival, Khomeini's message was not one of unity but of vengeance against the Shah and the foreign powers who had propped him up and whom Khomeini believed might still be plotting to reinstall him, as happened during the 1953 coup against Mosaddegh. Upon landing at Tehran's airport, Khomeini gave brief [remarks](#) in which he assailed foreign influence and vowed, "Our final victory will come when all foreigners are out of the country. I beg God to cut off the hands of all evil foreigners and all their helpers." He then traveled 11 miles to a cemetery where many of the revolution's victims were buried. There, he delivered a [victory speech](#), proclaiming that Bakhtiar's government was an illegal continuation of the Shah's rule. Khomeini pledged not to negotiate and said that if Bakhtiar did not resign, he would install a provisional government and arrest Bakhtiar and other government officials. He further acknowledged a growing trend of defections from the ranks of the armed forces and called upon Iranian army generals to abide by the people's will and join the side of the revolution.

Khamenei was among the revolutionaries at Tehran's airport there to greet Khomeini. For the next ten days, he was a part of Khomeini's entourage as the ayatollah set about consolidating power. During this period, Khamenei spearheaded a committee of the Islamic Revolutionary Council that promoted Khomeini's various meetings, appearances, and decrees since returning to Iran.

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Rafsanjani (L), Khomeini (Center), and Bazargan (R),
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

On February 4, Khomeini announced that he was [appointing Mehdi Bazargan as his prime minister](#) and tasked him with forming a provisional government, preparing a referendum on the question of whether Iranians wanted to establish an Islamic republic, and creating a constituent assembly that would prepare a new constitution. The Islamic Revolutionary Council settled on Bazargan for the role as he was a figure who was palatable to Khomeini due to his religious orientation and who was useful due to his ability to comfort and shore up support from middle-class, intellectual, liberal, and nationalist constituencies for the revolution due to his commitments to gradualism, moderation, and democracy.

Bazargan [reportedly](#) negotiated behind the scenes on Khomeini's behalf with SAVAK and the army chiefs for a peaceful succession, but on February 10, the order broke down. A group of young Islamist air force technicians staged a rebellion at a Tehran base, turning their weapons on their officers and fellow service members. This insurrection provided the impetus for Khomeini to enact his plan to distribute arms to loyalist mujahedin and fedayeen, as well as other armed groups, which his backers had stockpiled in mosques around the country, to use against the Shah's armed forces. Over two days, numerous mullah-led guerilla units, leftist guerilla groups, and defectors from the armed forces attacked and successfully overran police stations, prisons, armories, and military bases around the country and seized palaces, ministries, and the national broadcasting apparatus. Several hundred were killed in the unrest. Finally, on February 11 at 2 p.m., the Shah's Imperial Army [declared](#) its neutrality. Then, after it refused to quash the protests, the Shah's prime minister, Shahpur Bakhtiar, [resigned](#). The revolutionaries thereby claimed their final victory over the Shah; the broad-based Iranian Revolution was finally complete. Ali Khamenei recalled hearing an announcement come over the radio of the car he was traveling in, "[This is the voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran,](#)" and immediately getting out and falling to his knees in jubilant prayer.

The leadership role in the Iranian Revolution played by Khomeini and his clerical Islamist backers was the result of Khomeini's ability to serve as a unifying figure for various interest groups – religious, secular, liberal-democratic, socialist, nationalist, Marxist, middle-class bazaaris, intellectuals, alienated urban working poor – united only by their antipathy for the Shah and continued foreign interference in Iranian affairs. Iran's disparate political factions bought into Khomeini's heretofore vague vision of an Islamic Republic, as Khomeini hid his intention to install a theocracy predicated on *velayat-e faqih* and instead adopted disingenuous rhetoric, such as claiming he sought a democracy that would pursue political freedom and economic justice for the *mustafadin* (disinherited). Each faction brought its own competing and contradictory set of interests and expectations for the post-Shah era, but Khomeini was not interested in forging compromises or pluralistic governance. As soon as the Shah was toppled, he began the next phase of his plan, eliminating erstwhile secular and leftist allies to cement his theocracy.

Aftermath of the Revolution

Khomeinist Consolidation of Power

The unity, discipline, and spirit of cooperation that Iran's competing factions exhibited in toppling the monarchy broke down almost immediately after Shapour Bakhtiar's short-lived government fell. The hopes and aspirations of the Iranian population for more inclusive, less repressive governance, democracy, and economic justice never came to fruition. Over the early years of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini and his backers consolidated absolute domestic power ruthlessly while haphazardly guiding Iran into a series of international imbroglios – the takeover of the U.S. Embassy and subsequent 444-day hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq War – rendering the new regime embattled from the onset.

The takeover of Iran by the Khomeinist faction and the imposition of a clerical monopoly on power was not a foregone conclusion. However, the non-clerical factions within the broad-based, multiparty revolutionary coalition [underestimated the Khomeinists' desire to rule Iran, their organizational abilities, and large-scale popular support](#). The complacency by the non-clerical opposition was in part due to overly trusting Khomeini, believing his [repeated public declarations](#) during his Paris exile that neither he nor his clerical backers would hold direct power in a new government, as well as statements that the Islamic Republic would uphold ideological pluralism and respect the rights of women and minorities. Khomeini's backing of the non-clerical Mehdi Bazargan as prime minister of Iran's post-Shah provisional government seemingly validated his rejection of direct clerical rule.

Part of Khomeini's charisma and appeal was his ability to apply an ideological framework rooted in Islamic history and symbolism to give voice to the Iranian people's social, economic, and political grievances. According to the Khomeinist framework, Islamic revival also solved Iran's problems. Thus, Khomeini and his backers would seek a full-scale government takeover rather than returning to a separate religious sphere and leaving governance functions to assorted politicians and technocrats. The opposition factions additionally erred in assuming that clerical rule would be short-lived as their managerial incompetence was exposed, underestimating the Khomeinists' willingness to maintain power with an iron grip.

Khomeini and his followers consolidated power in the months and years after the revolution. It was characterized by increasing extremism, bloodletting, and antagonism toward the U.S. and the West that would set Iran inextricably on its repressive, confrontational trajectory. Although Khomeini had set up a largely secular provisional government under Mehdi Bazargan, Khomeini simultaneously sought to increase the power of clerical institutions, most notably [vesting significant power in the Islamic Revolutionary Council](#), which came to operate as a parallel government with the ability to pass laws.

Committed to gradualism and democracy, Bazargan's role, as drawn up by decree of the Islamic Revolutionary Council, was strictly transitional. He sought to bring the economy and government administration back to life following months of paralysis in the lead-up to the revolution. He laid the groundwork for drafting and adopting a constitution that would usher in Iran's new political order. Bazargan's wishes for a gradual, smooth, and orderly transition would be dashed by the untamable spirit of chaos and revolution swirling after the fall of the Shah and the Khomeinists' accrual of power through various parallel revolutionary bodies.

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The Islamic Revolutionary Committee on which Ali Khamenei served was the primary wellspring of Khomeinist post-revolutionary political power. The committee cooperated with Bazargan's provisional government on certain matters, such as pacifying ethnic uprisings around the country that sprang up after the revolution but ultimately competed with it. One of the Khomeinists' first orders of business following the Revolution was establishing a formal political party to institutionalize clerical power, create a link between the clerical elite and its base within the citizenry, and construct an official ideology for the nascent state. With Khomeini's approval, Khamenei was among the founders of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) on February 17, 1979.

Once founded, the IRP set about creating or co-opting existing institutions to consolidate power, destroy the opposition, and mete out justice to those who resisted the Khomeinists' program. One such important institution in the post-revolutionary aftermath was the revolutionary tribunals set up and monopolized by the Khomeinists, which capitalized on the public's demand for vengeance against remnants of the Shah's regime. The tribunals began executing former government officials, military, police, and SAVAK officers just days after the revolution, becoming a weapon against enemies of the Khomeinists deemed counterrevolutionary. Bazargan and other moderate voices within Iran criticized the tribunals for their barbarity and lack of due process, which Khomeini derided as evidence of the "[Western sickness among us.](#)"

The Islamic Republican Party also had loose ties to the [komitehs](#), informal, freelance militias operated at the neighborhood level as a primitive security and intelligence service. The *komitehs* were an extension of the neighborhood committees centered on the mosques that had been a locus for political organizing, demonstrations, and strikes in the years preceding the revolution. After the revolution, the makeshift militias were awash in pilfered arms seized from military armories during the Revolution and were, therefore, more powerful but also less disciplined. The *komitehs* helped the Khomeinists identify enemies and counterrevolutionaries and used intimidation to try and uphold revolutionary ideology and adherence to Islamic dress and mores. Bazargan strongly opposed the proliferation of the *komitehs* and their extralegal arrests, confiscations of property, and interference in legitimate government work. However, they served as a useful instrument of terror for the Khomeinists that the nascent state did not have the power to disarm.

Out of the *komitehs* was born [the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#), established by a formal decree of Ayatollah Khomeini on May 5, 1979. Tasked with preserving the Revolution, the IRGC's founding aimed to instill discipline in the haphazardly organized *komitehs* and create an entrenched base of armed power for the Khomeinist clergy. Iran's conventional military and security services were viewed suspiciously by the Khomeinists due to their links to the Pahlavi monarchy, and the formation of the IRGC provided an important counterweight to these forces as well as armed insurgent leftist groups that also posed a threat to Khomeini's power. The IRGC acted under the wing of clerical oversight from the Islamic Revolutionary Council and Islamic Republican Party, giving the Khomeinists what would become their most important independent power base. Picking up on the work of the *komitehs*, the IRGC made arrests, ran prisons, and interfered in government administration, playing an important role in Khomeini's efforts to wield ultimate power and eliminate rivals.

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Another source of Khomeinist power was the Foundation for the Dispossessed (*bonyad-e mostazafan*), the name given after the revolution to the former Pahlavi Foundation. This charitable organization held the Pahlavi family's assets. The Khomeinists additionally confiscated properties and businesses held by other elites during the Shah's reign, creating a massive endowment that the Khomeinists used to provide jobs, charity, and social services to poor and working-class Iranians, inculcating loyalty and creating a powerful base of support.

This network of clerical institutions constituted a parallel state, preventing the provisional Bazargan government from ever wielding significant power. As the Khomeinist clerics came to dominate, they enforced ideological conformity and behavioral controls on the Iranian public. Through the Islamic Revolutionary Council and Islamic Republican Party, the Khomeinists succeeded in placing representatives throughout government departments across the country, crowding out competitors and ensuring their dominance over the official, provisional government. This state of affairs led Bazargan to comment that he had become "[a knife without a blade](#)."

The Khomeinists' political power, and the Islamist direction of the revolution, would become entrenched following the wrangling over Iran's new constitution. Under the regime of fear established by the Khomeinists, 97 percent of respondents voted affirmatively in a referendum, asking whether or not they favored an Islamic Republic. Buoyed by this support, Khomeini backed off his initial support for a more secular, democratic draft constitution that was formulated during his exile to Paris. He denounced its proponents, including Bazargan, as "[enemies of Islam](#)." Khomeini's deputies in the IRP set about ensuring that the eventual constitution would enshrine Khomeini as Iran's Supreme Leader, upholding the notion of *velayat-e faqih*.

Immediately after the referendum, Bazargan's government announced preparations to elect a Constituent Assembly with nearly 300 members representing various factions. By mid-May 1979, however, the Islamic Revolutionary Council pulled the rug out from under this plan, unilaterally declaring that a 73-member Assembly of Experts would instead finalize the Constitution. The smaller assembly ensured that the Khomeinists could rig the vote and crowd out dissenting voices from the Assembly. Khomeini and his followers denounced those who protested their maneuvers as "[counterrevolutionaries against Islam, communists, or misguided people](#)," a menacing threat that had a chilling effect in the prevailing atmosphere of bloodletting. The Khomeinists launched a campaign to popularize the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, which to that point, remained unknown to Iranians outside of Khomeini's inner circle and most devoted followers. According to Khomeini biographer Baqer Moin, "one after another, members of the clergy joined the bandwagon to advocate a form of government that many Shi'i jurists regarded as unorthodox."

Concurrent with the campaign to boost support for *velayat-e faqih*, the Islamic Republican Party violently quashed dissent from those who favored a more pluralistic constitution. Over [40 opposition newspapers were shuttered](#), with some of the largest being turned to the *bonyad-e mostazafan*. A political faction created in March 1979 by remnants of the National Democratic Front, made up of secularists with a leftist bent who were unhappy with Bazargan's ineffectual gradualism, staged a series of demonstrations during this period over the constitutional process, freedom of the press and expression, and clerical overreach. Khomeinist gangs and the IRGC attacked these demonstrations and

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the headquarters of various opposition political parties. Against this backdrop, hundreds of thousands of modern, middle-class, educated Iranians emigrated to escape the revolutionary fervor, reducing the constituency for more liberal parties.

While some factions of both secular and religious bents opted to boycott the vote for the Assembly of Experts, those representing opposition factions who did contest it faced violence and propagandistic smear campaigns. Predictably, the elections for the Assembly yielded a body dominated by clerical and laypeople followers of the Khomeinist line. According to Baqer Moin, by the time the Assembly of Experts convened in August 1979 for their deliberations, even peaceful resistance to [“Khomeini’s brand of Islamization became, from this point onwards, virtually impossible.”](#)

The [Assembly of Experts](#) produced a constitution that was [“far more clerically oriented and potentially authoritarian”](#) than the original draft constitution, according to Iran expert Nikki Keddie. It was clear to Khomeini’s backers within the Assembly that there was no serious opposition to the notion of *velayat-e faqih*, so they institutionalized the role of the Supreme Leader and established clerical supremacy over the state, laying the foundation for a theocracy. The constitution explicitly named Khomeini as *faqih* for life, granting him extensive powers and imbuing him with divine authority to rule; he was only accountable to God. The constitution established Islamic jurisprudence, as interpreted by the *faqih*, as the foundation for the country’s laws and legal system and limited personal freedoms to what was permissible under Islam. The constitution retained some republican elements, including a president, prime minister, and *majles*, but all were subordinated to the Supreme Leader. The constitution also codified a role for the IRGC, tasking the organization with “guarding the Revolution and its achievements,” ensuring a primary vehicle for clerical power would be enshrined within the state.

Only a handful of members in the Assembly voiced opposition to the expansive powers granted to the *faqih*. One such opponent noted that the *faqih* must be proficient in not just religious affairs but also in administering statehood’s politics, economy, and day-to-day functioning. The path of clerical training was not ideal for inculcating such qualities. He went on to presciently note that a *marja* of Khomeini’s stature could embody the role. However, finding a successor who could replicate his leadership qualities would be virtually impossible, noting [“several centuries may pass before a man with his superior qualities and characteristics ... arise again.”](#)

On November 4, 1979, while the constitution was being finalized, Iran’s relations with the U.S. met an irrevocable setback, which the Khomeinists would capitalize on to push through their constitution and further violently consolidate power. As the leader of the provisional government, Bazargan worked to retain relations with the U.S. despite the Khomeinists frequent demonization. Ayatollah Khomeini was always convinced that the U.S. would not easily give up its decades of investment in a resource-rich American gendarme central to its regional hegemony. In May 1979, the U.S. Congress passed a [resolution condemning the excesses of Khomeini’s Islamic revolutionaries](#), leading to denunciations by Khomeini, followed by massive, broad-based demonstrations against American interference in domestic affairs.

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The U.S. Embassy Hostage Crisis

Relations continued to deteriorate over the next several months, reaching their apex when President Jimmy Carter allowed the Shah into the U.S. for cancer treatment in October 1979. Khomeini was convinced this was evidence of the U.S. plotting to restore its influence in Tehran, and his rhetoric against the “Great Satan” escalated. On November 1, Bazargan traveled to Algeria to represent Iran at a celebration of Algeria’s independence. While there, he met with U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and was photographed shaking his hand. Iranian radicals of all stripes, led by the Islamic Republican Party, seized on the image to castigate Bazargan for being in league with the Americans.

On November 4, 1979, roughly 500 radical students calling themselves “Students Following the Line of the Imam,” [led by an IRP official](#), stormed the U.S. Embassy compound, occupied the building and grounds, and took 90 hostages. After freeing women and black Marine Guards, the radical students held 52 hostages for 444 days. Khomeini backed the students, labeling the U.S. Embassy a “[den of spies](#)” and accusing the diplomatic personnel stationed there of being CIA agents plotting to overthrow the revolutionary government. He proclaimed the hostage crisis a “second Iranian Revolution,” as it cemented Iran’s anti-American trajectory, and he believed it united Iranians and strengthened his hand. Whereas Iran had previously been subjugated by the U.S., Khomeini’s revolutionaries faced off directly against U.S. might and the West, which did not have an answer to the hostage crisis. Khomeini boasted, [“The Americans can’t do a damn thing. ...The whole world is watching. Can America stand up to the world and intervene here? America would not dare.”](#)

The embarrassment had immediate and dramatic effects on revolutionary Iran’s relations with the U.S. All diplomatic ties were severed, the U.S. ceased oil imports from Iran, instituted a trade embargo, and stopped fulfilling arms agreements inked under the Shah. The takeover would likely have been short-lived without Khomeini’s support. Khomeini saw in the crisis an opportunity to weaken Bazargan’s liberal government, further radicalize the Iranian citizenry against the U.S., and consolidate power. From this point forward, he acted far more assertively domestically and on the world stage, as he was now a potent Islamic and international symbol of resistance to U.S. imperialism.

After attempting to persuade Khomeini to release the hostages and realizing he was powerless, Bazargan and his provisional government resigned. This represented a significant political setback for Iran’s secular, liberal, and well-educated middle-class constituencies and ensured that revolution would triumph over gradual reform. Following Bazargan’s resignation, Khomeini greenlit his clerical followers, who were not yet confident in their ability to manage the executive affairs of the country, to take over the administration. He immediately called for the constitutional referendum to be held and for preparations to be made for presidential and parliamentary elections.

The hostage crisis effectively stifled debate over Iran’s Constitution, as any opposition was now deemed treacherous. The IRGC further suppressed whatever pockets of resistance to velayat-e faqih existed, most notably in Iran’s restive Azerbaijani provinces where opposition was most fierce. On December 2 and 3, Iran held its referendum, and the constitution enshrining Khomeini as Supreme Leader was passed, with 99.5 percent voting affirmatively. Fewer Iranians voted on the constitutional referendum than the earlier referendum on the favorability of establishing an Islamic Republic, as many liberal and

secularist opposition parties, civil society associations, and Kurdish and Azerbaijani citizens opted to boycott the vote.

Khomeini himself was [not fully satisfied with the finalized constitution](#), as it retained clear Western influences in referring to human rights and allowing elections for republican institutions. Still, given the discontent in many quarters, particularly among more modern Iranians who were loath to give up the social freedoms enjoyed under the Shah fully, Khomeini decided that the constitution was sufficient for the time being. While allowing the populace to vote contradicted the notion of divine rule, Khomeini still had veto power over all major decisions and appointments. Still, the constitution created an inherent tension between the Iranian regime's theocratic and republican elements – a tension reflected at the societal level in the competing visions for repressive, clerical rule and the liberal, democratic aspirations of the Iranian populace – that has continued to play out across Iran's politics to the present day.

[Khamenei's Roles After the Revolution](#)

As the Khomeinists maneuvered to increasingly encroach upon all facets of state administration and consolidate power, Ali Khamenei's fervent loyalty to Khomeini and close relationship with Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was Khomeini's closest acolyte, began paying dividends. Throughout the 1980s, an extremely bloody decade during which Iran's revolutionary regime simultaneously faced intensifying domestic strife and a protracted war with neighboring Iraq, Khamenei rose through the ranks and was appointed to several important posts by Khomeini, boosting his public profile and revolutionary bona fides. Still, there was very little indication during the years between the revolution and Khomeini's death that Khamenei would eventually outmaneuver his allies and rivals to become the Islamic Republic's most important official.

Khamenei's first role after the revolution was serving as one of the founders of the Islamic Republican Party. According to his official [biography](#), Khamenei was among those who crafted the platform and manifesto for the party and was the founder of the party's central committee. He actively communicated the party's message through speeches and pamphlets and founded a [newsletter](#) that served as the party's mouthpiece.

Soon after the revolution, Khamenei, who had previously been a somewhat atypical cleric involved in intellectual and literary pursuits, began taking an interest and playing an active role in military affairs. His role in security would influence his approach to consolidating power as Supreme Leader, which relied heavily on creating patronage links at all levels of Iran's military, security, and intelligence apparatuses.

Asserting clerical control over the Islamic Republic's military and security agencies, which retained vestiges of loyalty to the Shah's regime, was an ongoing challenge for Khomeini and his followers in the aftermath of the revolution. Accordingly, the Khomeinists applied a [two-pronged approach](#), purging the military from the top down of officers and conscripts with ties to the Shah or who were deemed disloyal to the Islamic Revolution, and simultaneously, reorganizing the military's command and control structures to ensure clerical oversight over defense policy and planning. The overarching goal of the Khomeinists was to ensure that all facets of state security were in ideological lockstep with the goals and values of the Islamic Revolution.

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As the Islamic Revolutionary Council and Islamic Republican Party maneuvered to compete with Bazargan's provisional government by placing Khomeinists in strategic positions, Khamenei was appointed Deputy for Revolutionary Affairs in the Defense Ministry in late July 1979. Little has been written about his tenure, but based on his title, he was likely engaged in efforts to purge counterrevolutionary elements and sentiment and instill ideological conformity with the aims of the Islamic Revolution in the armed forces. He held the position until the fall of the provisional government on November 6, 1979, just days after the occupation of the U.S. Embassy by radical student followers of Khomeini.

When the siege of the U.S. Embassy occurred, Khamenei was in Mecca experiencing the *hajj* with Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani's [account](#) of hearing the news shows that neither he nor Khamenei initially supported the embassy takeover. Rafsanjani recounted, "We were surprised because we did not expect such an incident. It was not our policy...It was obvious that neither the Revolutionary Council nor the interim government had any inclination toward such acts." If Khamenei did have misgivings about the embassy seizure, he chose never to air them publicly, as such a break with Khomeini would have imperiled his political future.

In Khamenei's recounting, he backed the takeover from the outset as soon as it was clear that the hostage takers were Khomeinists. According to Khamenei, the more liberal members of the Islamic Revolutionary Council feared that America would respond to the hostage crisis in a manner that would topple the revolution. Khamenei consistently defended the actions of the students in deliberations with the Council and gave a speech outside the Embassy compound during the holy month of Muharram in which he [noted](#), "Not only we did not lose anything in this campaign against America, but we gained something, which was giving hope to the people and glorifying the revolution. This helped us elevate the image of Iranians in the world." Khamenei believed that revolutionary regimes historically suffered from retaining relationships with their former colonial masters. He approved of the embassy takeover, because it severed linkages between Iran and the U.S. After he was chosen as the representative of the Revolutionary Council, Khamenei would defend Iran's treatment of the hostages and accompany foreign reporters who were permitted to interview the Americans.

In December 1979, Khamenei was appointed as supervisor of the IRGC, a position he held three months before resigning to run in the first *majles* election. In January 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a decree appointing Khamenei as the Friday prayer leader for Tehran, a position which greatly enhanced his public profile. Friday prayer leaders in cities around Iran were an important force multiplier for Khomeini's efforts to convey his ideology and strategic positions to his followers as he consolidated power. Giving Khamenei the most prominent Friday prayer leadership showed Khomeini's high regard for his communication skills. According to his official [biography](#), Khamenei came up with the innovation of holding congresses of Friday prayer leaders to ensure that Khomeinist clerics within Iran – and eventually, at Khomeinist institutions outside of Iran's borders – delivered unified messages each week. A New York Times profile [wrote](#) of Khamenei's tenure as Friday prayer leader, "For more than a year, the slim, intense clergyman delivered fiery sermons before large crowds. He usually spoke with a rifle in his hand, jabbing its muzzle into the air to make his points as he castigated the "Great Satan, America," the leaders of Iraq and the political foes of Ayatollah Khomeini."

The Origins of Iran's Republican Institutions

Following the passage of Iran's constitutional referendum in December 1979, the country turned its attention to its first-ever presidential and *majles* elections in early 1980. Khomeini was wary of the potential backlash among secular and moderate Iranians if the proceedings gave off the appearance of an imposition of clerical rule over Iran's nascent republican institutions. In the interest of legitimizing the Islamic Republic's new hybrid system among the population writ large, not just his followers, Khomeini barred clerics from running for the presidency. Numerous other candidates were also disqualified, including Mas'ud Rajavi, the leader of the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK). This Islamist Marxist movement was part of the coalition to oust the Shah. However, Khomeini sidelined it after the revolution due to its rejection of *velayat-e faqih* and the decision to boycott the December 1979 referendum.

The IRP's lay candidate had to withdraw when it came out that his father was Afghan, contradicting the new Constitution's demand that the President be of Iranian origin and nationality. He was replaced by an obscure candidate who came in a distant third, garnering just over 3 percent of the vote. Despite the IRP's paltry showing, the election did not indicate that the Khomeinists lacked favor with the population, nor was it a sign of organizational weakness. The winning candidate, Abolhassan Banisadr, who amassed more than 75 percent of the vote, was popular with the left but was also closely associated with Khomeini in the public's mind due to his role as an advisor during Khomeini's exile in Paris. Banisadr favored an Islamic government for Iran, although his vision was more democratic than Khomeini's. He saw Khomeini in the pre-revolutionary period as a useful vessel to gin up anti-Shah and anti-foreign domination sentiment. He helped make Khomeini a palatable figure among Iran's intelligentsia. Thus, Khomeini saw Banisadr as a figure he could work with until he was no longer useful.

Banisadr was inaugurated as a powerful figure on February 4, 1980, serving as President and [head of the armed forces and Supreme Defense Council](#) after Ayatollah Khomeini transferred his constitutional authority as commander-in-chief to Banisadr. Reflecting Khomeini's support, Khamenei, in his capacity as Tehran Friday prayer leader, exhorted his followers to "[respect him, follow him, support him in the field, cooperate with him, do not undermine him.](#)" The goodwill would not last, however, as Banisadr saw in his victory a mandate to chart a more moderate course for the revolution and to rein in clerical power. In his words, he sought to rescue the revolution from "[a fistful of fascist clerics.](#)" He abortively sought to pursue an agenda that included integrating the IRGC into the regular army, dissolving revolutionary courts and reestablishing a centralized justice system, and doing away with the excesses of property expropriation to create a stable economic development and investment environment.

The IRP, led by its powerful secretary-general, Ayatollah Beheshti, offered Banisadr limited support at the beginning of his presidency, conditioned on following the Khomeinists' preferred path of militant Islamism. Ayatollah Khomeini also appointed Beheshti as chief justice of the supreme court, and his control over the IRP and judiciary gave him considerable influence over the Khomeinists' primary instruments of revolutionary terror. Beheshti's appointment as chief justice further ensured that Iran's legal system would be immune to secularist or liberal reformation efforts and instead take an Islamist trajectory. Banisadr's agenda, which called for a "year of order and security," was essentially predicated on reining the Khomeinists' excesses. So he was frustrated at every turn by the IRP, which was loath to

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integrate its parallel network of institutions, such as the IRGC and revolutionary tribunals, into a unified central government.

The limitations on Banisadr's power became apparent early on due to the growing ascendance of the IRP, which won an outright majority of seats in the *majles* elections held in March 1980. Unlike the presidential election, Khomeini explicitly encouraged clerics to run for the *majles* and called on the population to "[vote for only good Muslims](#)." In addition to placing his thumb on the scales in this manner, Khomeinist thugs in the *komitehs* attacked rallies and offices of rival parties, most notably the Mojahedin-e Khalq, which failed to win a single seat despite its growing popularity.

Following its resounding victory in an election marred by allegations of intimidation and irregularities at the polls, the Khomeinist majority selected Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as Speaker of the Parliament. Ali Khamenei had resigned as head of the IRGC to run in the *majles* elections, and he won a seat as a representative from Tehran. Reflecting his good standing with the party, Khamenei served as the [head of the defense committee](#), where he prioritized bolstering the IRGC's armed strength and integrating the *Basij*, irregular paramilitary volunteer units, into the IRGC.

Over the next few months, bitter wrangling ensued as the IRP moved to block several of Banisadr's allies from serving in his cabinet, as well as his preferred choices for prime minister, leaving him no choice but to select an IRP candidate, Mohammad Ali Rajai. Banisadr had hoped that his ability to handpick a prime minister would enable him to appoint an ally who would be a rubber stamp for his agenda, ensuring that the presidency would evolve as a stronger office than the prime minister. He failed to predict the IRP's dominance at the polls, which stripped him of that ability. As a result, the prime minister became a more powerful position until the role was eventually abolished. Banisadr frequently clashed with Rajai, whom he viewed as an incompetent ideologue. However, Rajai had the upper hand due to the backing of Beheshti and the IRP, although Khomeini himself tried to stay above the political fray.

Months into his presidency, the IRP controlled the parliament, the judiciary, and the president's cabinet, ensuring that Banisadr could not govern effectively. The ascendant IRP moved to purge modernists and technocrats from government ministries, replacing them with revolutionaries acceptable to the emerging Khomeinist order. The Islamic Revolutionary Council formally launched a [cultural revolution](#) during this period, which also sought to transform Iran into a conservative Islamic society through repression, purging any vestiges of Western, liberal culture and values. Iran's universities were the primary battleground, as they were the focal point for leftist and liberal education and political organizing.

Ayatollah Khomeini set the stage for an attack on Iran's universities in April 1980, [declaring](#), "We are not afraid of economic sanctions or military intervention. What we are afraid of is Western universities and the training our youth in the interests of West or East." Shortly after that, Khomeinist *komitehs* violently clashed with leftists, forcing them out of universities. Professors, many of whom had actively opposed the Shah, were now deemed insufficiently revolutionary and were dismissed. Ultimately, Iran's universities were shut down for three years while the newly formed High Council on the Cultural Revolution moved to Islamize the curriculum of Iran's entire education system.

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The Khomeinists also moved to pressure women from participation in public life and imposed repressive mores against them. The number of [political prisoners ballooned](#) during this period to pre-revolutionary levels, and executions of political prisoners and those accused of morality crimes increased. Many professors, students, doctors, and engineers fled Iran, creating a dearth of expertise that has plagued the country today. The Iranian system was effectively recalibrated to prioritize devotion to Islam and the revolution over technocratic expertise.

In September 1980, the Iran-Iraq War threatened to topple Iran's post-revolutionary government but instead actually accelerated the Khomeinists' consolidation of power. Saddam Hussein, the Sunni leader of a majority Shi'a nation, was wary of the Islamic Revolution next door, which had energized Iraq's oppressed Shi'a population, and of the Khomeinists' explicit desire to export the revolution. Khomeini hated Hussein ever since being banished from Najaf and frequently demonized the secularist leader publicly as an infidel. Unsatisfied with a 1975 treaty inked with the Shah to resolve a border dispute over the Shatt al-Arab River, Hussein saw an opportunity to redraw the map in his favor and blunt the momentum of the Islamic Revolution in its infancy.

Sensing the Islamic Revolutionary regime was weak and vulnerable due to the domestic political turmoil and ethnic unrest gripping the country and its international isolation as a result of the still-ongoing hostage crisis, Hussein launched a surprise invasion on September 22, 1980, seeking to seize the oil-rich province of Khuzestan, which also contained numerous strategic waterways and coastal access to the Persian Gulf. The Iranian armed forces were in disarray on the eve of the Iran-Iraq War due to ongoing purges of its officer class and the inability to procure needed weaponry and parts from the West. Iran's defenses along the Iraqi border were weak, as much of the military's existing capacity was tied up in pacifying ethnic conflicts in restive provinces.

Hussein thought the Arab population of Khuzestan, which had been agitating for local administrative and cultural autonomy, would welcome his incursion and rise on behalf of Iraq. However, instead, the war [united Iranians under the banner of nationalism](#). The Khomeinists sought to imbue the fighting with Shi'a symbolism and appeals to martyrdom, which inspired huge numbers, particularly of the *basij*, to give their lives in "human wave" assaults to repel the Iraqi invasion. Iranians of all backgrounds rallied to the flag and joined in the cause of the "Sacred Defense" of their homeland. The Iran-Iraq War further hardened enmity toward the U.S. as well, as Khomeini and his followers viewed the conflict as an imposed war on behalf of American and Western interests to topple the Islamic Revolution and gain back control over Iranian energy resources and strategic waterways. The U.S. did not encourage Saddam Hussein to invade Iran, nor did it actively arm him [until Iran had gained the upper hand in the conflict](#). In their conspiratorial worldview, the U.S. and its allies opposed a revolutionary, independent Iran that would not uphold their interests in the region and would go to great lengths to sabotage the revolutionary regime and return Iran to a vassal state. Saddam Hussein's brutality in waging war, including using chemical weapons and carrying out aerial bombings of civilian population centers, had long-lasting psychological scars and are used to the present day as evidence of U.S. perfidy and to justify claims that the U.S. existentially threatens the Islamic Revolution.

Ali Khamenei was active in the war effort from the outset, participating in military planning meetings on responding to the Iraqi invasion. Days into the conflict, he volunteered to go to the front lines to prepare

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a report on the condition of Iranian forces and their needs. He would spend the first few months of the war, from September 1980 until June 1981, going back and forth between the front lines. He was not on active duty but did [assist combatants and participate in some operations while continuing](#) to perform his duties as Friday prayer leader. During this period, Khamenei also served as Khomeini's representative on the [Supreme Defense Council](#), an umbrella body created in October 1980 to serve as a unified command for Iran's conventional armed forces and the IRGC. Khomeini appointed Banisadr as the chairman of the Supreme Defense Council. This position gave him the trappings of authority and made him a convenient scapegoat set up to fail.

Despite the efforts to align the activities of Iran's conventional and irregular forces, tensions remained, and the Khomeinists' mistrust of the conventional military continued unabated. These tensions would contribute to the undoing of President Banisadr, who backed the conventional armed forces over the IRGC. The Khomeinists suspected Banisadr would use his ties to the conventional forces to launch a coup. They leveraged these fears to secure better equipment for the IRGC, allowing it to strengthen its position relative to the conventional forces. According to a [study](#) of the Iran-Iraq war by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "The situation was made worse because the regular forces tended to husband their resources while trying to organize for counteroffensives, while the Pasdaran (IRGC) infantry was constantly at the front of the day-to-day fighting and took most of the casualties. The Pasdaran got virtually all the favorable coverage in the Iranian media, while the Mullahs began to accuse the regular forces of sacrificing the Pasdaran while protecting their own lives. The net result was that President Banisadr increasingly came to rely on his role as commander-in-chief of the regular forces as a basis for power under conditions which cost him both religious and popular support." During this period, the IRGC expanded through recruitment, as it came to be mythologized as the true guarantor of the revolution. It also became a more sophisticated, professionalized, and better armed fighting force with invaluable combat experience.

The Fall of Iran's First President

Unmoved by the prevailing spirit of unity in the country, Banisadr and the IRP did little to temper their infighting during the early months of the conflict. Prime Minister Rajai sought to sideline Banisadr at every turn, prompting Banisadr to [write a confidential letter to Khomeini](#) in October 1980 appealing to him to dismiss Rajai and dismantle the IRP-dominated government, which he claimed was incompetent, lacked public support, and had declared war on his presidency. Using the war emergency as a pretext, the Khomeinists increased their repression within Iranian society, [intensifying the ongoing Cultural Revolution](#) and prosecuting the war on their opponents with the same vigor as the conflict against Iraq, shuttering newspapers and tamping down on dissent. The Khomeinist revolutionary *komitehs*, which Banisadr had sought to rein in, [reasserted their presence](#), enforcing curfews and establishing patrols to monitor for "subversives."

With his reform agenda frustrated, Banisadr sought to resolve his differences with the Rajai government. He also frequently began meeting with Ayatollah Khomeini to implore the Supreme Leader to mediate on his behalf. When this approach failed to yield progress, he went on the offensive against the IRP. Banisadr began traveling around the country, making speeches and holding rallies where he attacked his clerical rivals. He began writing a [daily column](#) in his newspaper where he openly aired his

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political grievances. In his columns, he compared the IRP's dominance to the era of single-party rule under the Shah, labeled the Cultural Revolution as an attack on knowledge and expertise because the IRP had neither, and accused the Khomeinists of frequently engaging in torture, an emotionally fraught accusation given the torture many revolutionary leaders suffered under the Shah.

Banisadr's incendiary attacks on the IRP were tantamount to sedition in the eyes of the Khomeinists. They responded by denigrating his loyalty to Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution and began using their informal power structures to censor and harass Banisadr and his allies. Club-wielding *komitehs* broke Banisadr's speeches and rallies, and the IRGC and revolutionary courts escalated arrests and harsh punishments of opposition elements. According to scholar Shaul Bakhash's [historical account](#) of the period, the Khomeinists "deliberately worked to sharpen the dispute into a struggle between Islam and secularism, the clerics and the Westernized intellectuals, revolutionary steadfastness and compromise, and ultimately, loyalty and disloyalty to the person of Khomeini."

As the pressure campaign against Banisadr mounted, the MEK, an organization far to his left, increasingly allied with the beleaguered president. The MEK backed Banisadr's calls for pluralism, free speech, and association, which they saw as necessary for their continued political survival. They saw in the moderate Banisadr a vehicle that could lead the radical group to more mainstream acceptance among the middle classes. The MEK mobilized its followers to attend Banisadr's rallies, providing a force that could fight back against the *komiteh's* attempts to violently break up these demonstrations. Still, the MEK's opposition was fractious. Banisadr and his supporters among bazaari and conservative religious camps chafed against drawing too close to the MEK's Marxist economics and calls for secularist governance.

While the MEK attempted to fight back against the *komitehs*, they were outmatched by the brutality of the club and switchblade-bearing Khomeinist partisans, which killed dozens of their opponents in street clashes around the country in the final months of Banisadr's presidency. Banisadr continued to appeal to Khomeini to rein in this street justice. However, Khomeini and other IRP officials offered only feeble condemnations of hooliganism while blaming Banisadr for stoking the masses' anger. While Khomeini's sympathies lied with his partisans, he did not fully break with Banisadr, as he still needed buy-in from Banisadr's constituencies to keep the revolutionary regime afloat. As Banisadr drew closer to the MEK and increased his denunciations of Khomeini's closest clerical allies and the excesses of the revolution, however, Khomeini's support waned.

Khomeini made one final attempt to mediate the dispute between Banisadr and the IRP in March 1981. Khamenei was among the IRP leaders brought into the meeting, alongside heavyweights such as IRP Secretary General and Chief Justice Ayatollah Beheshti, Parliament Speaker Rafsanjani, and Prime Minister Rajai. After the meeting failed to yield progress, Khomeini [reiterated his support](#) for Banisadr as commander-in-chief and banned both sides from further speeches or articles that would contribute to factionalism. While ostensibly a neutral ruling, Khomeini took away Banisadr's ability to press his case to the populace, forcing him to silently acquiesce to being a figurehead president with all the real power in IRP control. Convinced of his popularity, Banisadr soon resumed public denunciations of the IRP in his newspaper and at demonstrations, [increasingly challenging Khomeini's authority directly](#). After calling on his supporters to resist the revolutionary regime's slide to dictatorship, tantamount to calling for an

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uprising, Khomeini finally withdrew his support for Banisadr. On June 7, 1981, his newspaper was banned; days later, Khomeini stripped him of his role as commander-in-chief.

Having finally lost Khomeini's support and recognizing that the IRP was increasing its repression of opposition elements, Banisadr hid. Rafsanjani initiated impeachment proceedings against him in the *majles* on June 20 and 21, 1981. By this time, arrests and executions of his aides and violent crackdowns on his backers had begun in earnest. As the *majles* debated, hostile crowds outside chanted "Death to Banisadr," vowing retribution against any legislators who defended him. Given the charged atmosphere, only a handful of the 40-45 members who supported Banisadr's agenda dared speak in his favor. Banisadr was overwhelmingly impeached and removed from office, with only one member voting against the action and several more abstaining.

The elimination of Banisadr proved an insurmountable setback for the loose coalition of moderate and leftist forces in the country. In the run-up to his impeachment, the MEK and the National Front had organized what they hoped would be mass demonstrations of support for Banisadr and against the IRP. However, these failed to move the needle, especially as many sympathetic to their ideologies opted not to take to the streets over fears of Khomeinist club-wielding hooligans. On the actual day impeachment proceedings began, the MEK, backed by almost all other opposition groups, called for Iranians to march against dictatorship, which according to Baqer Moin, was "[the most direct challenge to Khomeini since the revolution, and an unmistakable attempt to overthrow the religious establishment.](#)" The IRGC joined forces with the Khomeinist *komitehs* to suppress the demonstrations, opening fire on the crowd in Tehran, arresting hundreds, and [reportedly](#) carrying out summary executions of MEK supporters on the spot.

Following his impeachment, Banisadr issued calls for a [mass uprising](#) from hiding. Khomeinist forces, meanwhile, continued suppressing ongoing, sporadic MEK-led demonstrations, leading the group to change tactics in favor of armed rebellion. Banisadr opted to fully embrace the MEK at this point and entered into a formal alliance with the group. A month later, Banisadr and the MEK's leader, Masud Rajavi, fled Iran and settled in Paris, where Banisadr was an advisor to Ayatollah Khomeini before the Revolution. This time around, Banisadr and Rajavi would work to overthrow Khomeini, creating the National Council of Resistance, an umbrella group for Iran's beleaguered opposition factions to coordinate their anti-regime activities and plans for governance if they succeeded in toppling the Islamic Revolution.

Banisadr's impeachment touched off an era of guerilla warfare between liberal and leftist forces led by the MEK and the Khomeinists. The MEK's [strategy](#) was first to destabilize the regime by assassinating key leadership, then crippling it through large-scale demonstrations and strikes that it hoped would lead to a mass uprising and regime overthrow. The MEK's assassination campaign would eliminate many of the key figures within the IRP, some of whom presumably would have been ahead of Khomeini in the queue for the prime leadership roles he went on to obtain.

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Khamenei.ir

Khamenei after surviving assassination attempt, Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Ali Khamenei was the first figure targeted in the assassination campaign. On June 27, 1981, Khamenei returned to Tehran from one of his sojourns to the Iran-Iraq War battlefield as Khomeini's representative on the Supreme Defense Council. While delivering a speech at the Abuzar Mosque in southern Tehran, a bomb placed in a tape recorder on the table before him detonated, gravely wounding Khamenei. In his telling, his [pulse briefly stopped](#) following the blast. Khamenei was hospitalized for 42 days and suffered hearing loss, lung and vocal cord damage, and permanently lost the use of his right arm. According to a relative who grew up with Khamenei, the bombing changed Khamenei and

[“made him deeply angry inside – it gave him a grudge against people.”](#) It is unclear which faction was behind the bombing; it was initially attributed to the [Forqan group](#), a militant Shi'a organization opposed to the existence of clergy. However, today, Khamenei and the regime allege that the MEK was behind the plot in their [propaganda materials](#).

Khamenei's miraculous survival enhanced his prestige in Khomeinist circles, and he came to be seen as a [“living martyr.”](#) Ayatollah Khomeini sent Khamenei [a note](#) filled with fulsome praise, showing the high esteem in which he held his protégé, in which he declared, “Today the enemies of Islam have carried out an assassination attempt on you, the one who is from the genealogy of the tribe of Imam Hossein, the son of 'Ali. You have done nothing but serve Islam and this country. You have been a faithful soldier at the frontlines, and a passionate teacher for the public. ... I personally congratulate you Mr. Khamenei that you have served this nation in the frontlines in a military uniform and behind the battlefield in a clerical garb. I beseech God to bestow His goodness upon you so that you can continue to serve Islam and Muslims.”

The day after the attempt on Khamenei's life, the terror campaign against the revolutionary regime escalated dramatically. On June 28, 1981, a powerful bomb tore through the IRP's Tehran headquarters during a party leadership meeting. Over 70 people were killed in the blast, including many prominent figures, most notably Ayatollah Beheshti, the IRP's Secretary General and Iran's chief justice, who was the second-most powerful regime official behind Khomeini. Four other cabinet ministers and 27 IRP *majles* members were also among the casualties of the attack, which the regime attributed to the MEK.

The attack shook the regime's confidence and increased its paranoia, as its adversaries had demonstrated the ability to penetrate the inner sanctum. All leading officials were suddenly potentially marked for death. The Khomeinists responded with increased repression of the MEK and other opposition elements, spurring further terror attacks. Over the next few months, the regime's security and intelligence services undertook operations to disrupt the opposition's ability to carry out further

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armed rebellion. Mass arrests increased, targeting operatives and intellectuals, journalists, artists, and ordinary demonstrators opposed to clerical rule. Whereas the regime had previously sought to obfuscate its human rights abuses, it [began carrying out public executions and stepping up the mistreatment of prisoners](#) at Tehran's notorious Evin prison to deter rebellion through fear.

A month after Banisadr's impeachment, Iran held a presidential election to replace him. For the first time, the Guardian Council vetted and disqualified candidates based on their loyalty to the revolution, whittling the field down to four from more than 70 applicants. All four candidates ran under the banner of the Islamic Republican Party, as other parties were effectively banned at this point. Rajai, who had served as prime minister during the Banisadr presidency, was elected with [90 percent of the vote in an election with a 64 percent voter turnout](#).

Just over a month into his term, on August 30, 1981, a bomb targeted a meeting of the government's special security committee at the prime minister's offices. President Rajai, his prime minister who had also succeeded Beheshti as Secretary General of the IRP, and the national chief of police were killed in the bombing. Rajai's assassination was just the latest in the MEK-led ongoing terror campaign; various Friday prayer leaders around the country, provincial officials, the warden of Evin prison, and revolutionary court justices also lost their lives during this period. As security tightened around senior officials, the opposition also targeted lower-level officials, members of revolutionary organizations, and Revolutionary Guardsmen.

The tumultuous Banisadr presidency and subsequent declaration of war by the opposition against the revolutionary regime eliminated whatever trepidation Ayatollah Khomeini previously had about the clergy appearing to monopolize political power and implement a theocracy in Iran. He now encouraged his clerical followers to take a more hands-on role in all administration matters and to run for higher office. Secular experts and technocrats were pushed out of key decision-making jobs throughout the government, as Khomeini now opined that as an inherently political religion, clerics learned in Islamic jurisprudence were the most qualified to run all aspects of statecraft and bureaucracy, as they were the only figures who could ensure that all decisions complied with Khomeini's revolutionary Islamism. As a result of Khomeini's decrees, clerics came to play a pervasive role in daily life in the Islamic Republic, forming an extensive network of Khomeinist representatives who increased the clergy's control to near totalitarian levels. Every public institution – the courts, schools and universities, local government offices, and workplaces – was dominated by the Khomeinist clergy, creating a system far more pervasive and repressive of individual liberties than the Shah's regime.

Khomeini publicly intoned that clerics could uniquely be entrusted with the highest positions of authority, as they did not seek personal glory or power, but rather, were vessels concerned only with ensuring the supremacy of Islam. In one speech justifying greater clerical involvement, Khomeini [stated](#), "I have brought them up. I brought up Beheshti, Khamenei, and Rafsanjani. They are not monopolistic. Of course, they want the monopoly of Islam." In another speech, Khomeini spoke of the importance of clerics serving at every state level, [saying](#), "For as long as we have no competent people to do the job, the clergy should stay in their positions. It is below the dignity of a clergyman to be a president or to occupy other posts. He does it because it is a duty. We have to implement Islam and should not fear anyone."

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With the spate of assassinations of senior IRP officials, including President Rajai and his prime minister, Mohammad-Javad Bahonar, clearing the path, the surviving party elites appointed Ali Khamenei as secretary general of the IRP and shortly after that asked him to run for president. Khamenei's political activism in support of Khomeini's revolutionary Islamism during the Shah's reign and his fulfillment of various lower-level duties following the Islamic Revolution gradually elevated his stature within the IRP. It had shown he was a committed and willing functionary. He was by no means an innovative religious or political thought leader, which made him a suitable choice for the still-largely ceremonial role of president. The Khomeinist framers of the Islamic Republic's Constitution, who were insecure as they were not fully in power at the time, had designed the presidency to give the public the sense that they had input into shaping their destiny but purposely made the position weak, so that no president could challenge the supremacy of the *faqih*. Banisadr's presidency gave the system a stress test, but it functioned as designed, ensuring he was powerless to rein in clerical control and enact his reform-minded agenda.

Still recovering from his injuries sustained in the June 27, 1981 assassination attempt, Ali Khamenei [reportedly](#) demurred at the offer of the presidency, saying he would not be able to devote sufficient energy to the role due to his ill health. His colleagues allegedly responded, "That is why we are offering you the post." As such, Khamenei brought stability to the presidency for the first time after the revolution. He served two terms as a largely subservient president who outwardly framed his role as helping enact Supreme Leader Khomeini's vision. The tensions between the Iranian government's republican and theocratic elements, which reared their head during every other presidential administration, were notably muted during Khamenei's tenure. When he did have differences of opinion with Khomeini or chafed over his lack of influence, he would seek out the more established and powerful Rafsanjani to appeal to Khomeini on his behalf for more authority.

[Khamenei's Election to the Presidency](#)

The Islamic Republic of Iran held its [third presidential election](#) on October 2, 1981. The Guardian Council whittled the field of 46 applicants to four candidates permitted to stand for election, all of whom ran under the banner of the Islamic Republican Party. Ali Khamenei, who at the time was 42 years old and had attained the mid-ranking title of *hojatoleslam* (Authority of Islam), won the non-competitive election with more than 95 percent of the vote in a contest with nearly 75 percent eligible voter turnout.

Ayatollah Khomeini installed Khamenei into office on October 13, 1981. Khamenei outlined his presidency's primary objectives as prosecuting the external war against Iraq and the internal conflict against the remnants of leftist and MEK opposition, framed as proxy battles in the larger ideological conflict against the U.S. and the West. At the outset of Khamenei's presidency, an additional objective was continuing to advance the Cultural Revolution to ensure the hegemony of Khomeinist ideology over all facets of life in the Islamic Republic. These themes were front and center during Khamenei's inaugural address, a fiery speech in which he vowed to eradicate "[deviation, liberalism and American-influenced leftists](#)" amid cries of "death to America" from the gathered crowd. In his address, Khamenei [declared](#) the public's large-scale participation in the election "disgraced and quashed the propaganda networks affiliated with the Zionists and the world Imperialists, who meant to destroy the Islamic

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Revolution through their poisonous propagandas.” He branded himself as a faithful executor of Khomeini’s Islamist vision for Iran, further asserting that he understood his duties as president as “ensuring that God would guide all decisions for the purposes of Islam. ... Thus, I make a commitment to do my part and strive in the path of establishing the rule of Islam, which is the desire of our revolutionary nation.”

Immediately upon assuming office, Khamenei was faced with the limitations of his power, as he lost a dispute to appoint his favored candidate for prime minister, [Ali Akbar Velayati](#), who eventually became the longest-serving foreign minister of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei would later install Velayati as his foreign policy advisor after he became Supreme Leader. With all other parties effectively banned, the only space for state-sanctioned ideological contestation was within Iran’s single party. Previously existing fissures came to the fore within the IRP, leading to the emergence of two distinct factions, the Islamic Left and the Conservatives. Both factions were in alignment over the core issues of loyalty to the Islamic Revolution and Khomeini and support for *velayat-e faqih*. However, they differed in terms of their economic, cultural, and foreign policy outlooks and their interpretations of how *velayat-e faqih* should be practically applied. Over time, the factions would evolve and even swap positions on certain issues, most notably, relations with the U.S. Nevertheless, in general terms, the Islamic Left was the antecedent for today’s moderate and reformist factions while the conservatives form the current hardliner or principlist camp.

At the time, the Islamic Left [favored](#) a populist, redistributive economic approach benefiting working-class Iranians predicated on land reforms, strong government intervention in the economy, central planning, and nationalizing key industries. Socially, they favored more tolerant and egalitarian attitudes and wanted less religious domination over daily life. The conservatives’ primary constituencies were the bazaar merchant class and highly religious segments of society, reflected in their economic and cultural program. The conservatives [supported](#) a free market economic approach with the protection of private property rights, extremely limited state economic intervention, and minimal taxation of the private sector. Culturally, they favored state enforcement of strict adherence to *sharia*.

The left at the time was more antagonistic to the U.S. due to strong anti-imperialist currents in leftist thought and latent sympathies for the Soviet Union. At the same time, the conservatives also mistrusted the U.S. but were more pragmatic about the need to cultivate economic ties with the West to weather isolation. These positions would effectively reverse down the road. The left also more strongly favored exporting the Islamic Revolution to neighboring countries, while the conservatives eschewed foreign policy adventurism. Perhaps the major philosophical difference between the left and right, which would later lead Khomeini to issue a rare public rebuke of Khamenei, was the role of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). The left favored the notion of dynamic *fiqh*, meaning that *sharia* would need to evolve and adapt to deal with new societal issues that did not exist during the life of the Prophet. At the same time, the right believed in a static notion of *fiqh* whereby the state and society would need to adapt to the existing, immutable Shi’a orthodox jurisprudence.

Khamenei was a somewhat heterodox figure who did not completely fit the mold of the Islamic Left or conservative factions. Leftist ideals had partly influenced his worldview during his time spent in literary and intellectual circles, and the left’s anti-imperialism especially colored his anti-Americanism. As a

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seminarian, he also [applied a revolutionary Marxist framework](#) to Islamic religious precepts, such as the unity of God. Reflective of his desire to fit into the more liberal intellectual world, he adopted mannerisms such as smoking a pipe in public, wearing a wristwatch, and growing his hair under his turban that cut against the grain of the more conservative clerical world. But as a cleric, he never fully fit in nor was trusted in the intellectual world, and his ideology was also shaped largely by conservative Islamist thinkers. Essentially, he never fully gained acceptance in either world.

Despite being influenced by leftist intellectual thinkers, as the Khomeinist Islamic revolutionaries consolidated power, Khamenei increasingly identified with and belonged to the conservative faction. The populist Islamic Left faction dominated the *majles* at the time of his accession to the presidency, setting the stage for internecine power struggles. The first of these occurred over Khamenei's choice for prime minister. Khamenei put forth Velayati, a U.S.-educated pediatrician from the conservative faction, for the role, but the parliament [voted](#) 80-74 to reject Velayati, with 38 members abstaining.

Faced with rejecting his preferred candidate, Khamenei reluctantly nominated Mir-Hossein Mousavi, affiliated with the leftist, populist bloc of the IRP, for prime minister. Mousavi was one of the founders of the IRP along with Khamenei, Rafsanjani, and Beheshti and served as the editor-in-chief of *Jomhuri-e Islami* (Islamic Republic), the party's newsletter which Khamenei had founded in 1979. Mousavi was a [distant relative](#) of Ali Khamenei (his full name was Mir-Hossein Mousavi Khamenei, as he came from the same northwestern city of Khameneh to which Ali Khamenei's family traced its lineage) and would go on to become Khamenei's primary nemesis. The ideological differences between the two highlighted the fault lines between reformists and hardliners characteristic of Iranian politics, eventually translating into a deep personal animus toward Mousavi by Khamenei.

While Khomeini largely stayed above the political fray and sought to maintain a balance between the IRP's factions to ensure that neither faction would break with him, his ideology largely aligned with the Islamic Left. He infused his revolutionary Islamism with anti-capitalist, anti-Western Marxist rhetoric and populist economic appeals to society's dispossessed. Accordingly, it was widely understood that Mousavi was "[the Imam's Prime Minister](#)," the *majles* overwhelmingly confirmed him for the position by a margin of 115-39 on October 28, 1981. Khamenei's efforts to assert himself during his presidency were frequently frustrated by Mousavi, and his role was, therefore, effectively ceremonial. Mousavi would play the dominant executive role, buttressed by Khomeini's unwavering backing. Still, to assuage the right and encourage unity, Mousavi appointed several conservatives to prominent cabinet positions, including Velayati as foreign minister.

From the outset of the Khamenei presidency, the revolutionary regime's primary preoccupations were crushing the MEK-led uprising, which had begun in earnest following Banisadr's impeachment; fully consolidating hegemonic control over the Islamic Republic; and prosecuting the war with Iraq. It accomplished its first goal within 18 months of Khamenei's presidency. Immediately following the sensational bombing attacks on the IRP headquarters and the Prime Minister's Office, the regime began employing drastic measures to crush the incipient rebellion. This process continued after Khamenei's election. The Khomeinist government suppressed street demonstrations, raided numerous "safe houses" used by the MEK and other insurgent groups, and stepped-up mass arrests and executions. Between June 1981-September 1983, Amnesty International [reported](#) nearly 3,000 executions carried

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out by the regime, 90 percent of which were MEK members, while the MEK reported more than 7,500 deaths from executions, street battles, and torture by regime agents.

Ultimately, the MEK failed in their mission to ignite a mass uprising against the Khomeinists, with the regime's ruthless campaign of counterterror dissuading the Iranian citizenry from joining the rebellion. The regime succeeded in decimating the leadership and membership of the MEK, confiscating much of its weaponry and printing presses, and disrupting its organizational networks. By 1983, most urban guerilla activities had ended. The MEK survived due to its large numbers, but its members primarily fled to the restive Kurdish areas of northwestern Iran, where they continued their resistance, Iraq, and Europe. By 1986, the group was expelled from Paris, and Iraq became its primary base of operations, with the group allying with Saddam Hussein's government against the Iranian regime. Its violent activities during the Iran-Iraq War led to it falling out of favor with the Iranian citizenry. Also, they drove [Banisadr to withdraw from the National Council of Resistance](#).

The Khomeinist government's experience pacifying the MEK-led uprising strengthened the extremist elements in the party, which advocated for ruthless suppression and legitimized terror, torture, and extrajudicial executions as governance tools. The revolutionary regime and the IRGC, which had remained unwavering in its support for the regime, emerged more firmly in control of the country than ever before. In early 1983, the regime turned on the Tudeh. This leftist party remained loyal to Khomeini throughout the MEK uprising and was accordingly permitted to publish and cultivate influence. Many of the Tudeh's leaders and members were arrested and/or executed after giving coerced confessions of spying, loyalty to the Soviet Union, and plotting to overthrow the revolutionary government, and the party was thereafter outlawed. With the last remnants of leftist opposition purged, the IRP had finally fully consolidated power.

The Khomeinists were fully ensconced in power, but the middle class and even the urban working classes began to chafe against the excesses of the IRGC and revolutionary *komitehs* and tribunals by the end of 1982, particularly against the routine executions of young offenders. The appetite for bloodletting waned as the constant turmoil created economic instability and an inhospitable business environment. The civil service ranks had been thinned by ideological purges and continued emigration by educated Iranians. Pragmatists within the ruling coalition, such as Rafsanjani and Mousavi, implored Khomeini to reign in the excesses and restore a semblance of order, which he did, issuing an eight-point decree in December 1982 that sought to curb the abuses of the IRGC and other extra-governmental revolutionary organizations.

Khomeini's December 1982 [decree](#) forbade the IRGC and *komitehs* from entering homes, confiscating property, surveilling citizens, and making arrests without proper legal authorization, and upheld citizens' rights of due process in Iranian courts. The constitution had guaranteed this right but was, in practice, effectively ignored. The decree succeeded in reining in the regime's brutality. It signaled to the middle and working classes that they could coexist with the regime and resume their economic activities, provided they upheld Islamic mores in public life. According to Shaul Bakhash, "the new mood of pragmatism did not imply political liberalization, a deemphasis on Islamic orthodoxy, or greater tolerance for political opposition. The instruments of repression remained firmly in place. ...The propensity toward extremism was blunted but not eradicated. Rather, the new mood suggested a desire

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by the religious leaders to restore economic and administrative order and a readiness on their part to allow the technocrats to look after the economy, while the clerics retained power, controlled politics, saw after ideology, and made the basic decisions.”

One byproduct of the limited openings made due to the regime’s full consolidation of power was that the Khomeinists felt secure enough to reopen universities in early 1983, an undertaking overseen by the Committee on the Cultural Revolution, a body on which Khamenei played the dominant role after assuming the presidency. The committee had used the period of university closures to ensure that higher education in the Islamic Republic would thereafter serve solely to buttress the Khomeinists’ cultural and ideological hegemony. In the [view of Khomeini and other leading revolutionary IRP officials](#), Iran’s Islamic universities were meant to have a different purpose from the modern, Westernized universities they replaced. Iran’s universities were to treat scientific advancement and training students for professional life as secondary pursuits. In Khomeini’s fundamentalist view, all useful science emanated from Qom, the seat of Iranian clerical power. According to him, “the science which they [modern universities] have is no good for our Islamic society.”

Iranian universities’ primary focus was ensuring that students received the requisite religious and ideological indoctrination to make them committed revolutionary subjects. During the university closures, the Committee on the Cultural Revolution worked to integrate the university system with the system of *hawzehs* (religious seminaries), ensuring that religious study would be the focal point of the newly “Islamified” universities. Insufficiently revolutionary professors were [purged](#), with the number of lecturers dropping from 16,000 before the closures to 9,000 when universities opened back up.

Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution

In December 1984, the Committee on the Cultural Revolution was formally institutionalized as an arm of the state by a decree by Khomeini. President Ali Khamenei was named chairman of the newly codified Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, a body whose primary [objectives](#) included “expansion and promotion of the influence of Islamic culture in the society..., purification of scientific and cultural establishments from materialistic ideas and clearing the country’s cultural environment from manifestations of Western influence, and development of universities, schools, and cultural and art centers in accordance with the righteous Islamic culture.” Khamenei held this position throughout the duration of his presidency.

Khamenei saw his mission as the chief enforcer of Iran’s Cultural Revolution as nothing less than a holistic transformation of the Islamic Republic into a society run on Islamic principles. In a 1983 interview, Khamenei said, “Of course one of the goals of the Islamic Revolution from the very beginning was to turn Iran into an Islamic society where everything, every aspect of social, cultural, economic, political and personal life is governed by Islam and Islamic principles. Islamization of a nation that has been functioning in a Westernized or semi-Islamic society is a difficult task that takes many years, and is an ongoing movement. The Islamization process is both an internal and external Islamization – that means the Islamization of both domestic and foreign policies and of course domestic life in every aspect.”

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One of Khamenei's primary successes in the Cultural Revolution was blunting the momentum of Iran's student movement. Prior to their closure, Iran's universities were key incubators of liberal ideology and anti-clerical activism in society; upon their reopening, textbooks, and curricula were altered, students were segregated by gender, and professors and students deemed "un-Islamic" or "counterrevolutionary" were purged in order to ensure that universities served to advance Iran's clerical-led revolutionary order.

From the reopening of Iran's universities in 1983 until the end of his presidency, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution chaired by Khamenei oversaw the banning of books that promoted Westernized thought and enforced regulations on "[moral criteria](#)" that student applicants were required to meet to be admitted to universities. Students had to affirm their belief in Islam or one of the other state-sanctioned "divine religions" (Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism) and pass vetting by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Intelligence, the Revolutionary Prosecutor's Office, and the General Prosecutor's Office to ensure that their personal morality and political activities were in alignment with Islamic Revolution to gain admittance. The Supreme Council oversaw the formation of institutions permitted to operate within the university system, mostly Islamic student associations that supported the regime, effectively placing it in control over the affairs of all university students. As a result of these measures, the regime was able to tamp down on the university as a key node of dissent for a prolonged period.

The Iran-Iraq War

Concurrent with his administration's efforts to solidify Khomeinist political and cultural hegemony by crushing MEK and university opposition to clerical rule, Khamenei's first term was also notable for the conduct of the Iran-Iraq War. Despite diverting significant attention to suppressing internal unrest, dealing with the spate of assassinations of multiple prominent IRP officials, and contending with an economic crisis, the government was able to marshal sufficient resources to turn the tide of the war in the early years of Khamenei's presidency. The fall of Banisadr's presidency and the emergence of a more uniformly Khomeinist government translated into a greater unity of command over and discipline within the ranks of the IRGC and conventional armed forces. The [conventional army and IRGC began to cooperate far more closely than under Banisadr](#) when suspicions abounded about the conventional army's loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Iran began to use its significant manpower advantages, and the IRGC – newly battle-hardened after a year of combat experience – led the way to a string of Iranian successes.

During the first months of the war, Iraq had taken advantage of the Iranian armed forces' disarray and conquered more than 4,000 square miles of Iranian territory. Their offensive stalled, however, after Iran's predominantly Arab population in Khuzestan province responded to the invasion with increased nationalism rather than welcoming Iraq and rebelling against the Islamic Republic, as Saddam Hussein had hoped. Advancing farther into Iran and conquering more cities would therefore require massive numbers of additional troops, which Iraq opted against, deciding to fortify and defend the territory it had taken. Iran began its counteroffensive to retake the territory occupied by Iraqi forces shortly before Khamenei assumed the presidency, notching its first major success in September 1981 when Iranian forces broke the year-long siege of Abadan, home to Iran's key oil installations. Iran's advances

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continued during the early stages of Khamenei's presidency with a string of small victories, culminating in a major turning point in the war when Iranian – predominantly IRGC – forces recaptured the country's most important port, Khorramshahr in May 1982. More small victories ensued, and shortly thereafter, Iraq held only 200 square miles of Iranian territory.

With Iran en route to reclaiming its full territorial integrity and the Iraqi armed forces badly demoralized, Saddam Hussein began looking for a face-saving way to end the conflict. On June 6, 1982, Israel invaded southern Lebanon, and Saddam Hussein subsequently ordered Iraqi troops to abandon the Iranian conflict, ostensibly to bolster Syrian and Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) forces in their fight against Israel. Hussein [called on Iran to stop fighting and redirect its resources toward the war with Israel](#). However, the clerical leadership, euphoric following its victories, dismissed Hussein's entreaties. Hussein sought out numerous international interlocutors to broker a peace deal with Iran, but with Khomeini setting the tone, Iran rejected multiple offers and insisted on maximalist terms, including the restoration of the 1975 treaty borders with Iraq, the admission of full guilt for the war, more than \$150 billion in reparations, and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. Faced with these impossible terms, Hussein announced he was continuing with the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Iran unilaterally to remove any pretext for the continuation of the conflict, repositioning them to form a line of static defense along the border to ward off a potential Iranian counter-invasion.

Hussein had hoped that a decisive victory against Iran would cement his status as the leader of the Arab world, but his failures left Iraq reliant on other Arab states for support and his grip on power shaky. Ayatollah Khomeini had similar visions of grandeur for the Islamic Revolution, which he envisioned as growing into a supranational liberation movement for oppressed Muslims the world over, with himself serving in effect as *velayat-e faqih* (supreme spiritual guide) for the entire Islamic World. Following the Iranian recapture of Khorramshahr in May 1982, an internal debate occurred within the upper echelons of Iran's leadership over whether to press the war into Iraqi territory. According to Ayatollah Khomeini's son, Ahmad, [who served as his chief of staff and most trusted advisor](#), the Imam initially thought it best to end the war after the reconquest of Khorramshahr, as he feared the war would "[never end](#)" if an Iranian invasion did not quickly succeed.

Despite their rivalries, Iran's primary civil leaders, including President Khamenei, Prime Minister Mousavi, and Foreign Minister Velayati, were [generally united in a moderate outlook when it came to the question of pressing the war into Iraq, a view they shared with the conventional army](#). They feared that the military would become overextended and that the human and material costs would be exorbitant, possibly imperiling the stability and future of the Islamic Revolution. However, Khamenei and his more moderate compatriots' outlook was quickly overshadowed by the prevailing atmosphere of triumphalism after the reconquest of Khorramshahr. Many saw the hand of the divine in the rapid string of Iran's decisive defeats of Iraq's better-equipped, most elite forces. More hardline and radical clerics in the *majles* and on the Supreme Defense Council, headed by *majles* speaker Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, as well as many top military commanders, particularly in the IRGC, felt the time was ripe to take out Saddam Hussein once and for all. Iraq was facing financial difficulties due to its loss of oil exports and growing unrest in the country's predominantly Shi'a south, which led many Iranian military

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and political officials to conclude that the Iraqi Shi'a would ally with the Islamic Revolution and Khomeinism in order to be liberated from Saddam Hussein's secularist Sunni Baathism.

Beyond removing the threat of Saddam Hussein, the more radical elements of Iran's leadership saw the continuation of the war as the perfect opportunity to kickstart the project of exporting the Islamic Revolution and cleansing the region of Western influence. Iraq was home to some of Shi'a Islam's holiest cities and shrines. Iran's leadership stoked religious fervor about liberating Karbala to drum up support for continuing the war. More importantly, Saddam's downfall and extending the dominion of the Islamic Revolution to Iraq was framed as [a stepping stone on the path to liberating Jerusalem](#).

Khomeini's initial caution over invading Iraq evaporated almost immediately as he bought into the messianism of his most radical backers. Having repelled the Iraqi invasion and gained the upper hand against, but not completely quashed, MEK-led domestic unrest, Khomeini sought to marshal the rising tide of militarism and revolutionary fervor to facilitate the final consolidation of the Islamic Revolutionary regime and cement clerical control. Khomeini biographer Baqer Moin said, "[Khomeini was also persuaded that the revolution would not be allowed to survive if it remained within Iranian borders. He began to see himself as the acclaimed leader and liberator of oppressed Muslims from both the Eastern bloc and from Western powers represented by Zionism.](#)"

On June 21, 1982, the debate over whether to continue the war was settled, as Khomeini issued a statement calling for Saddam Hussein's overthrow. Khomeini declared his intention to establish an Islamic government allied with Iran in Iraq, [which he hoped would spur a domino effect among the smaller Gulf nations](#). Iran set about creating the [Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq \(SCIRI\)](#) that year. This proxy political party later developed a militant armed wing intended to lay the groundwork for establishing a Khomeinist Islamic Revolutionary government in Iraq. Iran would replicate this model in Lebanon, where it initially backed Amal and then was pivotal in founding the more militant, explicitly Khomeinist [Hezbollah](#), the Gulf, and beyond. To [export its revolutionary ideology](#), Iran focused on indoctrinating Shi'a communities through propaganda and funding social services in tandem with the IRGC, which funded, equipped, and trained militant elements and subversive activities.

President Ali Khamenei and the other civil leaders who advised against carrying on the war in Iraq had no choice but to quickly abandon their misgivings once Khomeini's decision was made. The near civil war at home was raging on, spurring the escalation of external militarism. In the prevailing climate, it was virtually unthinkable to advocate moderation. The public statements of senior political and military officials became increasingly bellicose, including Khamenei's, who explicitly backed the notion of extending Khomeini's guardianship over Iraq and beyond. In one such speech, Khamenei [declared](#), "The future government of Iraq should be an Islamic and a popular one. The policy of *velayat-e faqih* will be Iraq's future policy, and the leader of the Islamic nation is Imam Khomeini. ... Government and state officials are limited to international borders, but the Imam is not limited by geographical frontiers."

Khomeini's decision to carry the war into Iraq was ill-fated. The Islamic Republic's seemingly miraculous successes in reconquering its territory led to hubris among Khomeini and his advisors, who overestimated both Iran's military capabilities and the universalist ideological appeal of Khomeinism. Just as Iran's Arabs did not ally with Saddam Hussein following the Iraqi invasion, neither did the Iraqi

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Shi'a rally to support the Iranian invasion. Despite Iran's advantages in terms of the size of its forces and the revolutionary zeal of its IRGC and *basij* partisans, it proved unable to overwhelm Iraq's technical superiority and defensive advantages. The war became a fruitless war of attrition with no off-ramp in sight.

Iran's decision to invade Iraq brought it renewed regional and international opprobrium, curtailing Iran's military procurement capabilities. The Gulf monarchies, which in 1981 formed a collective defense organization, [the Gulf Cooperation Council \(GCC\)](#), over fears of Iran's revolutionary export, rallied to support Saddam Hussein, fearing the Iranian invasion represented an escalation toward spreading the revolution through full-scale warfare rather than political meddling and acts of subversion that Iran had been doing. The Soviet Union, which had been neutral at the onset of the war and sold arms to both sides, [tilted toward Iraq](#) after Tehran's crackdown on the pro-Soviet Tudeh party in 1983, becoming Saddam Hussein's largest arms provider with sales totaling \$11.5 billion between 1984-1987. France became Iraq's largest Western benefactor, which Iran's leadership took as evidence of an "imperialist front" designed to crush the Islamic Revolution. Iran's mistrust of the West was further reinforced during this period by the U.S. pressuring its allies not to sell arms and to curtail its business investment in Iran while at the same time providing diplomatic cover for Saddam Hussein's war crimes, which included targeting Iranian civilians, energy infrastructure, and the use of chemical weapons.

Despite Iran's lack of progress in overthrowing Saddam Hussein, conquering and holding Iraqi territory, and liberating Shi'a holy sites in Iraq, Ayatollah Khomeini pursued his crusade, framing it as a religious duty, regardless of the human and material costs borne by the Islamic Republic. Because Iran could not procure advanced weaponry or materiel compatible with its mostly American-made military stock, it became increasingly reliant on "human wave" attacks, in which large numbers of infantry troops acted as cannon fodder to penetrate enemy defenses. The [human wave attacks](#) were predominantly carried out by the *basij*, who relied on Shi'a religious propaganda and established a cult of martyrdom to recruit boys as young as ten years old, mostly from peasant and working-class backgrounds, and to a lesser extent, elderly, unemployed men. The *basij* recruits would infamously clear enemy minefields by walking across them so that more regular infantry units could advance.

While Iran's human wave tactics were employed successfully to demoralize Iraqi troops during the reconquest of its territory, they [proved futile](#) during the Iranian invasion of Iraq. Iraqi military planners with superior intelligence and knowledge of the terrain became adept at repelling the human waves, strategically retreating troops to draw the *basij* into easy "killing zones." Between 1982 and 1985, numerous Iranian offensives resulted in Iran taking only small slivers of Iraqi territory while failing to achieve major objectives, such as capturing the major port city of Basra. Although Iran's human wave strategy failed to gain territory and created large casualties, Khomeini continued to stonewall international demands for a ceasefire, defiantly telling critics, "[These international bodies never ask this man who talks of peace why he attacked Iran.](#)"

Within Iran, the continued usage of the human wave strategy emerged as a key issue for debate. IRGC Chief [Mohsen Rezaei](#) and *majles* speaker Rafsanjani, who had taken over from Khamenei as Khomeini's representative on the Supreme Defense Council and was his most trusted civilian advisor on the war, were the most prominent advocates for continued mass infantry assaults. Many officers from Iran's

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conventional forces, who were more conservative, argued that the human waves were unsustainable, a view [shared by rivals Khomeini and Mousavi](#). The influence of Rezaei and Rafsanjani won out with Imam Khomeini, and Iran continued using the human wave strategy despite its futility. The IRGC's influence within Iranian society also grew, with the force serving as an extension of and repository for additional clerical power. The commitment of its conscripts and volunteers to the revolution and willingness for martyrdom led Iran's leadership to funnel most recruits, funds, and weaponry to the IRGC and *basij*, cementing their supremacy over the conventional forces by this point. Reflecting its growing prominence and permanence beyond the current conflict, the regime created a separate ministry for the IRGC, distinct from the defense ministry, and the group also began establishing its own air and naval forces.

In the spring of 1984, Iran held parliamentary elections, and the ongoing debates within Iran over the conduct of the war drove increasing IRP factionalism. The Islamic Left, helmed by Mousavi, increased its power within the IRP and emerged as the dominant faction within the *majles*. The Guardian Council – the 12-member deliberative body adjudicating whether all legislation complies with *sharia* and the Iranian Constitution – was dominated by conservatives and vetoed much of Mousavi's agenda, leading to political stagnation and increasing tensions between the left and conservative factions.

By this point, the war's high casualties and deleterious economic effects were sapping Iranian morale within the armed forces and the civilian population. Ayatollah Khomeini stressed that [revolutionary steadfastness and fighting against Western imperialism outweighed material comforts](#) and continued prosecuting the war despite food and other shortages. Khomeini repeatedly rebuffed Saddam Hussein's entreaties for a ceasefire, prompting Hussein in early 1984 to threaten attacks on the Iranian home front in response to Iran escalating its offensives within Iraq. Khomeini was unmoved, and Iraq began campaigns in early 1984 referred to as "the war of the cities" – aerial bombardments and ballistic missile attacks on Iranian cities and towns that killed thousands – and "the tanker war" – attacks on Iranian oil refineries, energy infrastructure, and commercial shipping vessels. These campaigns sowed terror by design, leading to further contractions of the Iranian economy and the loss of oil revenues. Iraq was able to carry out this targeting of Iranian civilians with virtual impunity, as Iran had to exercise caution in its responses and avoid carrying out blustery threats, such as closing the Strait of Hormuz to commercial shipping, to prevent the U.S. or other Western powers from more actively intervening in the conflict.

While the Iranian public faced numerous privations due to the ongoing war, Prime Minister Mousavi developed a reputation as a pragmatic and competent manager who stopped the situation from getting too out of hand. The turmoil of the 1979 revolution, followed by the initiation of the Iran-Iraq War, had created a dire economic situation. Iran's foreign currency reserves [had dropped from \\$14.6 billion at the onset of the revolution to about \\$1 billion by the end of 1981](#). One of [Mousavi's first duties was to revive oil production](#) to offset these losses and meet the exigencies of wartime spending. He grew Iran's oil revenues from [\\$12 billion in 1981 to \\$19 billion in 1982 and 1983](#). However, Iran's oil revenues fell to \$6 billion annually by 1986 due to Iraq's imposition of the tanker war. Unemployment within Iran reached nearly a peak of 50 percent.

Mousavi's other primary task was implementing a ration card system, which earned him the nickname "[coupon prime minister](#)." Mousavi's management of this system ensured that despite Iran's declining

foreign currency reserves and oil revenues, massive wartime spending, sanctions, and a growing population, there were no food or other essentials shortages, and inflation remained low. Because the citizenry's baseline needs were met, Khomeini's calls for national sacrifice and austerity measures were rendered palatable, and national unity did not break down.

Given his central role in national planning, Mousavi recognized early into the Iranian invasion of Iraq that the high costs of the war were pushing the Iranian government to the breaking point. His radicalism waned, and he became more of a pragmatic than revolutionary manager, counselling that rapid, widespread revolutionary export was unrealistic. While Khomeini was unrelenting in his view of the war as necessary to uphold national cohesion and cement clerical control, he held Mousavi in high esteem for his managerial and economic prowess.

Khamenei's Second Term as President



Ali Khamenei voting in 1985 Presidential Election, Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

In August 1985, President Ali Khamenei handily won reelection for a second term, prevailing over two other IRP candidates permitted to run with 85 percent of the vote. Immediately following his successful reelection bid, Khamenei's first order of business was an ill-fated attempt to sack his rival Mousavi, which touched off the largest political crisis in Iran since the removal of Banisadr four years prior.

Frustrated by his lack of power relative to Mousavi and Rafsanjani and by the ongoing political gridlock engendered by the clash between the Islamic Left-dominated majles and conservative-controlled Guardian Council, Khamenei's animus toward Mousavi rose to the fore. According to Khamenei's [official biography](#), his dissatisfaction over differences of opinion and the futility of his working relationship with Mousavi was so vexing that he was unwilling to run for a second presidential term and only did so after Ayatollah Khomeini insisted it was his religious obligation.

Khamenei was typically a loyal and obsequious follower of Ayatollah Khomeini. However, his efforts to remove Mousavi were a rare instance of Khamenei asserting his interests and challenging Khomeini's absolute authority. Rafsanjani's contemporaneous [diaries](#) shed considerable light on Khamenei's machinations to remove Mousavi. In the days leading up to the election, in which Khamenei's victory was all but assured, Khamenei enlisted Rafsanjani to query Ayatollah Khomeini over whether he would support Khamenei in selecting someone other than Mousavi to take over as prime minister. From the onset, Khomeini rejected Khamenei's request, but Khamenei continued to press the matter, urging Rafsanjani to use his influence to change the Imam's mind. After Khomeini rejected a follow-up request

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from Rafsanjani, Khamenei upped the ante, issuing a public statement that he would appoint Mousavi to a second term [“only if the Imam orders it.”](#)

Imam Khomeini sought to appear above the fray, so he refused to give an official decree mandating Mousavi’s continuance in the role but expressed his opinion that Mousavi should not be replaced. At the inauguration of his second term, Khamenei defiantly spoke out against Mousavi, but the issue remained deadlocked. Rafsanjani continued to mediate behind the scenes, imploring Khomeini to issue a decree supporting Mousavi. However, Khomeini would not relent, although he reportedly remarked in one such meeting, “As a citizen, I pronounce that choosing anybody besides [Mousavi] is treason to Islam.” Khomeini’s statement made clear that Khamenei would be torpedoing his career were he to replace Mousavi. Khamenei finally relented and reappointed Mousavi as prime minister in October 1985.

In a rare show of defiance against the Imam, 99 *majles* members voted against Mousavi’s reappointment, although Khomeini’s backing of Mousavi was well known, and Khamenei himself later publicly declared he was among those who voted against Mousavi. The crisis led to further tensions between the Islamic Left and conservative factions, poisoning relations between the two sides for the duration of Khamenei’s second term. Khamenei continued to speak out publicly against Mousavi, which irked Khomeini and prompted his son and chief of staff, Ahmad, to intercede on his behalf to implore Khamenei to rein in his criticism, which he did to an extent.

During his second term, Khamenei sought to sideline Mousavi wherever possible and began to carve out a more assertive role for himself where he could, especially in foreign policy. Khamenei’s approach to foreign policy during this period centered on two main imperatives, the first being more traditional diplomacy to establish and broaden relations with non-Western aligned nations to ward off diplomatic isolation, bolster its economy, and secure materiel for the ongoing conflict with Iraq. He [traveled](#) to Pakistan, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, Yugoslavia, Romania, China, and North Korea to represent the Islamic Republic of Iran’s government. Khamenei’s secondary foreign policy goal was to spread Iran’s Islamic Revolution and establish Iran’s standing as the leader of the Muslim world. To that end, he focused on bolstering Shi’a political and militant movements around [the Middle East](#) and [Afghanistan](#) and improving their coordination so these groups could build pockets of Iranian political influence and undertake subversive activities to further Iran’s foreign policy objectives.

Khamenei’s increasing presence and assertiveness on the world stage helped elevate his gravitas and public profile within Iran, which undoubtedly contributed to his ultimate ascension to the Supreme Leadership. In February 1986, Iran achieved a breakthrough in the war with Iraq, [capturing and then holding the Faw peninsula in Southeastern Iraq](#), giving Iran its first major strategic foothold in Iraqi territory and cutting off Iraq’s sole access point to the Persian Gulf. The Iranian capture of Faw sent shockwaves through the Arab world, as it appeared that Saddam was in true danger of losing the war, giving Iranian morale a heavy boost. Saddam abandoned any pretensions of leading the Arab world or establishing dominance over the Gulf region. Instead, he began maneuvering desperately for peace with Iran, insisting on the continued survival of his regime as his only condition for peace. Iran, however, continued to insist on Saddam’s removal, even though subsequent offensives bogged down and the war again stalemated. Still, Iran remained in the driver’s seat so long as it retained control over Faw.

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With the tide of the war seemingly turned in Iran's favor, the high point for establishing Khamenei's foreign policy bona fides and cementing his stature as a representative of Iran's revolutionary worldview came in September 1987, when he traveled to the U.S. for the first and only time in his life to address the U.N. General Assembly in New York City. Khamenei's speech aimed to legitimize the Islamic Republic as a part of the international community, despite its isolation and the efforts of the U.N. to impose sanctions on its government.

Khamenei gave a fiery speech intended as much for domestic consumption – by Iran's citizenry and revolutionary leadership – as it was for the assembled heads of state. The speech came shortly after the U.N. had proposed Resolution 598, calling for an end to the Iran-Iraq War. In a speech preceding Khamenei's, U.S. President Ronald Reagan [demanded](#) Iran accede to a ceasefire or face further sanctions enforcement actions by the U.N. Security Council. Khamenei began his [speech](#) with a religious sermon outlining the basis for Iran's theocracy predicated on Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary interpretation of Islamic doctrine and culture. He then laid out how the forces of global arrogance – a term referring to the U.S. and its Western allies – had sought to dominate Iran by imposing the Shah's reign and then fought against the Islamic Revolution, as it represented hope for Muslim and other non-aligned countries to chart a course of independence free of Western domination, corruption, and oppression.

After laying out a litany of Western abuses of Iran and the Islamic world more broadly, including fueling the domestic MEK-led insurgency, Khamenei turned his focus to the "imposed" war with Iraq, a continuation of Western efforts to suppress the Islamic Revolution. While the war was still bogged down, Khamenei maintained Iran's hardline, insisting that it would not accept any ceasefire that did not meet the condition of labeling Iraq as the aggressor and punishing Saddam Hussein accordingly, as only then would there be a just solution to the conflict that could bring about a lasting peace between Iran and Iraq. He then issued an indictment of the international order more broadly, framing the war with Iraq as one of many conflicts, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the American invasions of Libya and Grenada, where hegemonic powers sought to dominate and subjugate weaker, independent liberation movements.

Khamenei called for a reformation of the U.N. system, particularly attacking the veto power and permanence of the five Security Council powers in favor of a multipolar system predicated on non-interference in smaller nations' affairs. "Our message to all Third World peoples and governments and to the peoples whose governments have created the order of domination is that the world must not tolerate this abnormal situation any longer. Everybody should tell the superpowers and powerful governments to stay within their own borders and leave the world to the people of the world: you are not their guardian," [exhorted](#) Khamenei. He went on to call upon the Third World to unify and collaborate in self-defense against the immorality and ideological corruption of the world's major powers.

Khamenei's incendiary speech triggered the American and Israeli delegations to [walk out in protest](#), a fact that he wore as a badge of honor and assurance of the correctness of his worldview. Following his return to Iran, he organized a week of "National Mobilization Against U.S. Aggression" to further inculcate a spirit of resistance among the Iranian citizenry. Nevertheless, despite the triumphalism of his

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U.N. address, public sentiment in Iran continued to turn against the futility of prosecuting the Iran-Iraq War in the months after the speech, and revolutionary fervor ebbed.

After losing the Faw Peninsula and with his pleas for peace continually rebuffed by Khomeini, Saddam Hussein concluded that his best chance for the survival of his regime was to increase Iranian suffering. He [escalated the tanker war and the war of the cities](#), attacking strategic energy and economic targets, carrying out aerial bombardments, and launching SCUD-B missiles against major population centers. Iraqi forces also became increasingly brazen in using chemical weapons to repel Iranian offenses. Western powers, who regarded Saddam's regime as a critical bulwark against the spread of Iranian-inspired Islamist fundamentalism, did not take actions to prevent their use.

Iran miscalculated its retaliations in the tanker war, particularly by targeting Kuwaiti ships due to their support for Iraq. It [prompted](#) the U.S. to reflag Kuwaiti ships as American and provide naval escorts for Kuwaiti maritime traffic in the Gulf. This direct American military involvement alarmed Iranian military leaders, forcing Iran to tread cautiously to avoid triggering a muscular U.S. intervention. As a result, Iraq could attack Iranian shipping with near impunity and without reprisals.

The ongoing economic privations and the futility and brutality of the conflict's combat and heavy losses dampened revolutionary morale. Iran faced the depletion of its reserves, and there was no longer a fresh supply of willing recruits to replenish the *basij*'s ranks, rendering the human wave strategy unsustainable. Iraq, buoyed by increased intelligence cooperation with the U.S., was reenergized and retook the offensive to reclaim its territory captured by Iran in the Spring of 1988. In a matter of weeks, Iraq recaptured the Faw Peninsula and dislodged Iran from positions around Basra and Majnun Island, rapidly reversing years of hard-fought Iranian gains.

With the tide of the war turned decisively against Iran, continuing the conflict risked outright humiliating defeat, which would imperil the entire Islamic Revolutionary project. By early 1988, Iran's leading military and political decision-makers increasingly agreed that Iran needed to extricate itself from the conflict. However, Khomeini, who by this time was seriously ailing, remained steadfast in his determination to carry on. Behind the scenes, factional squabbling continued as leaders from the Islamic left and right sought to blame each other for the war's failures. In one telling episode, President Khamenei sought to downplay his responsibility for any shortcomings by arguing that he was powerless within the Iranian political system. He [reportedly](#) told a gathering of IRGC commanders in Ahvaz, "Since responsibility for the government does not rest with me but with the prime minister, I am not responsible for the war and the government's actions...I do not approve of Mir Hossein Mousavi. I accepted him because the Imam ordered it."

In June 1988, Khomeini appointed Rafsanjani, who had throughout the conflict been the most prominent proponent for continuing the war, as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. This was a last-ditch effort for Iran to reshuffle its military apparatus and an implicit rebuke of IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei and other military leaders for failing to deliver victory. Khomeini called on Rafsanjani to restore unified command and facilitate greater coordination between the IRGC and the conventional military, which had broken down throughout the conflict. In his decree appointing Rafsanjani, Khomeini [said](#), "I call on the dear people of Iran and the armed forces and security forces to stand steadfast, with

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revolutionary patience and endurance and with strength and resistance, in the face of the plots of global arrogance, and to be certain that victory belongs to those who are patient. Today's world is saturated with injustice and treachery and you, the true followers of Islam, are at the height of purity and honor." Khomeini's words showed that despite, or perhaps because of, all the costs Iran had sunk into prosecuting the war, he saw continuing the war to victory as essential to the survival of his Islamic Revolution, and he was accordingly prepared to continue devoting lives and resources to his quixotic quest.

By the time he took over as commander-in-chief, Rafsanjani had developed a pragmatic streak that would define him. He recognized that exiting the war was vital for the Islamic Republic's continued survival. While not outright calling for an end to hostilities, he maneuvered behind the scenes to build the case to Khomeini that Iran could not continue. He gathered assessments from top military leadership on the state of their forces and what it would take to regain the upper hand and pursue victory. IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei gave a particularly bleak assessment, saying it would take at least five years and require extensive procurement efforts, which were all but impossible due to sanctions, to refurbish the IRGC and have any hope for an Iranian victory.

On July 3, 1988, the U.S. Navy mistook an Iranian civilian airliner for a military aircraft and shot it down, killing all 290 passengers. Although accidental, the incident hammered home to Khomeini and the final clerical holdouts that the U.S. and other forces of "global arrogance" would stop at nothing to deny victory to the Islamic Republic. Israeli historian Efraim Karsh wrote in his [analysis](#) of the Iran-Iraq War that the incident "provided the moral cover of martyrdom and suffering in the face of an unjust superior force that allowed the regime to camouflage the comprehensive defeat of its international vision."

Khomeini finally recognized that continuing the war was imperiling, rather than keeping alive, the Islamic Revolution and decided to accept U.N. Resolution 598 without conditions. In so doing, he prioritized regime survival over fervent adherence to revolutionary principles. President Khamenei sent Iran's official acceptance of a ceasefire to the U.N. Secretary-General on July 17, 1988, [stating](#), "We have decided to declare officially that the Islamic Republic of Iran – because of the importance it attaches to saving the lives of human beings and the establishment of justice and regional and international peace and security – accepts UN Resolution 598."

In a letter to the Iranian leadership and public, Ayatollah Khomeini [cited](#) Mousavi's assessments that the war had drained the country's coffers and Rezaei's analysis that victory could not be attained for at least five years without extensive procurement as the reasons he took the "bitter decision" to end the war. Khomeini concluded his letter, "You dear ones, more than anyone else, know that this decision is like drinking the poisoned chalice and I submit to the Almighty's will and for the safeguarding of Islam and the protection of the Islamic Republic, I do away with my honour. O' God! We rose for the sake of your religion, we fought for your religion and we accept the cease-fire for the protection of your religion. O' God! You are aware that we do not collude even for a moment with America, the Soviet Union and other global powers, and that we consider collusion with superpowers and other powers as turning our back on Islamic principles. You are aware that, the high-ranking officials of the system have taken this decision with extreme sadness and with their heart filled to the brim with love for Islam and our Islamic country." While the outcome did not deliver the victory they had sought, Khomeini and Iran's leadership

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framed the end of the war as a triumph of sorts since Iran, a fledgling power, had withstood the efforts of the U.S. and other superpowers to vanquish the Islamic Revolution.

Although it ultimately suffered defeat, the IRGC and *basij* emerged from the conflict as battle-hardened forces whose ideological commitments to the Imam and the Islamic Revolution never wavered. There was a brief debate on the role of the IRGC going forward, as their peacetime role was not clearly defined. Iran's clerical leadership considered folding the group into the regular armed forces and assigning them to defend the nation's borders. However, ultimately, the Khomeinists saw their ideological fervency and vast human resources as too valuable a tool to give up. The IRGC was kept intact and given peace-time religious and national service missions, including construction and engineering roles in rebuilding the country. This helped the IRGC take on an outsized role in Iranian non-military and economic affairs, which also translated into greater political power.

The end of the Iran-Iraq War ushered in a period of uncertainty over the future direction of the country and the revolution. For eight years, the war had destroyed Iran's infrastructure, ravaged its economy, and led to hundreds of thousands of Iranian deaths. However, despite hardships, it also served to unify much of the country behind the Khomeinist movement. In the immediate term, Iran's most pressing priority was rebuilding its military and energy sector. This necessitated Iran modifying its "neither East, nor West" ethos, and in the months after the war, Iran set about reestablishing diplomatic and trade ties with the Soviet Union, Canada, the UK, France, and West Germany. Because of the sectarian nature of its war with a leading Sunni-led power, the luster of the Islamic Revolution was dulled in the Sunni Arab world. Except for [Lebanon](#), where Iranian-inspired Amal and Hezbollah wielded significant influence, it appeared the threat of the export of the revolution had receded, and the Khomeinists would have to be content with an Islamic Revolution simply within Iranian borders.

Khomeini Solidifies his Legacy

The ailing Ayatollah Khomeini was embittered by the war's end and was loath to see his revolutionary ardor give way to a spirit of pragmatism. The end of the war removed the pretext of a national security emergency. Critics, including many clerics who had been Khomeini loyalists, felt as though they could now [criticize](#) Khomeini's exercising of near absolute power and the lack of a clear political, economic, and military strategy for prosecuting the war, without fear of being accused of aiding the enemy or being counterrevolutionary. Khomeini did not wish for the Islamic Republic to evolve in a less religious, less ideologically driven, and less confrontational direction and spent his final months ensuring that his legacy of radicalism would continue after his passing.

His first order of business was a purge of political prisoners within Iran's prison system, a massive bloodletting and human rights atrocity that tested his disciples' devotion. Leaked [recordings](#) would later reveal that the regime had considered mass killings of political prisoners for several years, but the pretext that finally greenlit the plan came in the days immediately after Iran accepted U.N. Resolution 598. During the war's later years, after its expulsion from France, the MEK remnants in exile had established a military headquarters in Iraq from which they planned to eventually topple the Islamic Revolution and had fought alongside Iraqi troops in some of the combat in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran's accession to the ceasefire signaled to the MEK that the regime was weak, and the MEK launched an ill-fated invasion across Iran's western border. The MEK combatants penetrated 90 miles into Iranian

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territory, further than Iraq had during the conflict. They occupied a few cities and towns, declaring their intention to advance to Tehran and topple the regime. The IRGC reversed the incursion in a matter of days. MEK members who could not retreat were killed in combat or executed on the spot.

Khomeini used the MEK invasion to claim an extant wide-ranging conspiracy for a MEK-led uprising and issued a secret fatwa ordering the execution of any prisoners who retained loyalty to the MEK. Khomeini's fatwa established death commissions in each province comprised of judicial, prosecutorial, intelligence, and prison officials who held summary trials outside any established legal or legislative framework and, following arbitrary questioning, put an estimated 5,000 prisoners to death. Amnesty International [said](#) the executed were mostly accused MEK affiliates but also secular leftists. The campaign reasserted revolutionary terror in Iran and pacified hardliners around Khomeini who feared that an atmosphere of relaxed social liberties and free expression after the war would lead to moral degradation and the dampening of revolutionary fervor. President Khamenei was one such leader who backed Khomeini's brutality in the 1988 prison purge. In December 1988, he was quoted in an official newspaper as [saying](#), "Do you think we should hand out sweets to a person who has been involved from inside prison with the activities of *monafeqin* (hypocrites) who launched an armed attack within the borders of the Islamic Republic? If his relationship with that apparatus has been made clear, what should we do to him? He is punishable by the death penalty and we would certainly execute him." Khamenei's willingness to go along with the regime's worst excesses would contribute to his succession as Supreme Leader months later.

Ayatollah Khomeini's last major public act as Supreme Leader was also calibrated to ensure that Iran would take the path of revolution over pragmatism and reconstruction after his death. On February 14, 1989, just four months before his death, Khomeini issued his infamous fatwa placing a religious duty on Muslims worldwide to kill British author Salman Rushdie over what he labeled blasphemous passages in his book, *The Satanic Verses*. The Rushdie affair was a seminal chapter in Iran's efforts to export the Islamic Revolution and heralded Iranian-inspired Islamism's arrival as a security threat to the West. According to Khomeini biographer [Baqer Moin](#), "By issuing the *fatwa*, Khomeini had made a serious bid for the leadership of the entire Islamic world, while, at the same time, finding a way to refocus the energies of those of his supporters at home who had been demoralized by the long, bloody inconclusive war. From being regarded by most non-Shi'a as merely a renewer of Islam, through the *fatwa* he became a spokesman for the frustrations and ambitions of Muslims in general, and not just those in Islamic countries. Compromise with the society around them was becoming a less and less attractive option among militant Muslims in Europe, and in the art of refusing to compromise there was no mentor more reliable than Khomeini."

With his final two major acts before his death, the 1988 prisoner massacre and the Rushdie *fatwa*, Khomeini signaled that Iran should continue to be more repressive and confrontational toward the West in its foreign policy after his departure from the scene. An internal struggle lasting decades would ensue over whether to take a more pragmatic or stridently revolutionary path, but the forces advocating the hardline approach have typically retained the upper hand, even when popular sentiment has forced brief experiments with domestic reforms and conciliation on the international stage. The story of Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, has been one in which the Islamic Republic emerged from a

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weakened state following the Iran-Iraq War to become one of the leading [threats to regional and international security](#), as well as a serial [abuser of human rights](#) of its citizenry.

Khamenei's Succession

Ayatollah Khomeini died on June 3, 1989. Khomeini's health had been an issue since he assumed the Supreme Leadership and became more concerned after he suffered a heart attack in 1986. Throughout his final years, finding a suitable successor who could carry on his radicalism legacy and ensure the revolutionary regime's continued survival was one of his primary preoccupations. Khomeini's unique charisma and religious stature enabled him to amass nearly absolute power and to prevent the bitter ideological factionalism among the clergy from derailing the ship of state. He was adept at maintaining the precarious balance between the Islamic Left and conservatives, preferring to stay out of most of the day-to-day squabbling. He did not heavily favor one side over the other when compelled to intervene. His pronouncements carried such weight that the losing party would have no choice but to follow his dictates, never losing esteem for the Imam.

Iran had undergone a systemic transition in 1979 from a monarchy to the Islamic Republic. However, the question that loomed large was whether the revolutionary regime, which emerged weakened following a bloody decade spent contending with an internal insurgency and a brutal external war, could survive a leadership transition following the passing of its founder and central figure. There were forces both within and outside the country that saw the death of Khomeini as an opportunity to exploit Iran's weaknesses and divisions and potentially topple the Islamic Republic. Khamenei weighed in at the time, [saying](#), "The enemy already had sinister plans for the period following the Imam's illness and death. Financial Times reported that with the leader's death, there would be a huge gap in the political system of Iran – a gap that would be impossible to fill. Radio America reported that Imam's death would be followed by instability throughout the country and this might even ignite civil war in Iran."

In authoritarian systems, leadership transitions are typically accompanied by uncertainty, if not outright crisis. Even in systems with clear-cut procedures for succession, newly installed leaders must gain the support, or sufficient fear, of a broad swath of the general population to establish stability and stave off a popular uprising. At the elite level, they must gain buy-in from key security and political heavyweights and balance competing factions and personalities wrangling for power, influence, and patronage. They very quickly need to cultivate allies and core constituencies that can help them survive and either coopt or marginalize potential adversaries, often through heavy-handedness and repression. They must often resort to arbitrary enforcement and frequent, sometimes capricious changes of rules and norms to maintain their grip on power.

President Ali Khamenei was ultimately picked as the successor to Ayatollah Khomeini. As a mid-ranking cleric who lacked the religious legitimacy and charisma of his predecessor and was overshadowed by several of his political rivals, Khamenei was a surprising choice nobody expected could fill the Imam's shoes. His political survival and that of the Islamic Republic were far from assured. Yet, he displayed a surprising political acumen that enabled him to retain power and play a more hands-on and consequential role than even Ayatollah Khomeini for over three decades. While his reign has brought

immiseration and increased repression to Iran and sectarian conflict and instability throughout the Middle East, Khamenei and the Islamic Republic have endured.

[Clearing the Obstacles to Khamenei's Succession](#)

From the moment he returned to Tehran on February 1, 1979, Khomeini's frail appearance prompted [speculation](#) about his health, placing the question of succession into focus from the outset of the Islamic Revolution. In the spring of 1980, he suffered a minor heart attack, further heightening the urgency of tackling the issue of succession. Once the regime had gained the upper hand in quelling the MEK-led insurgency, Khomeini ordered an election for the Assembly of Experts, the clerical body constitutionally tasked with selecting a successor for the role of Supreme Leader, in December 1982.

Khamenei was one of the 83 clerics chosen for the original Assembly of Experts, although he did not have a leadership role. Rafsanjani was also elected to the Assembly and, given his stature within the regime, was made one of two deputy chairmen of the Assembly. At the same time, Ayatollah Meshkini, an ally of Khamenei, was designated as the chairman of the Assembly.

The Islamic Republic's original 1979 constitution essentially tailored the qualifications for Supreme Leader to describe Ayatollah Khomeini. According to the constitution, the role of *velayat-e faqih* could only be assumed by a recognized *marja-e taqlid*, a cleric holding the title of Grand Ayatollah or Imam who was universally recognized within the Shi'a world as a source of emulation. At the time, few clerics could claim Khomeini's religious and revolutionary qualifications, and his appointment was a fait accompli. According to the constitution, if a suitable replacement did not exist, a council of three to five senior clerics would instead be needed to fill the role of Supreme Leader.

The Assembly of Experts began convening to designate a successor to Khomeini in July 1983. Khomeini provided the Assembly a [sealed envelope](#) containing his political testament, the contents of which have never been made public and may not have even been known to Assembly members. He implored the Assembly to choose a successor "for the sake of God and for God alone," an exhortation to the Assembly members not to let personal ambition or factionalism cloud their judgment. However, such earthly considerations certainly played into the process.

No other individual cleric in Iran could claim Khomeini's religious and political stature, which made selecting his successor difficult. Most of those who had attained the necessary religious credentials were advanced in age and more traditionalist and orthodox, rejecting core Khomeinist principles. They opposed the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* and felt clerics should stay out of the political realm. Khomeini's [hatred for the orthodox clergy](#) rivaled his hatred for the U.S., as he felt they were reactionaries whose advocacy of quietism made them tools of corrupt leaders. Khomeini insisted that only adopting his revolutionary ideology could lead to the liberation of the oppressed.

Two schools of thought emerged within the Assembly of Experts over who should succeed Khomeini. The first backed Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, the next senior-most cleric behind Khomeini who backed *velayat-e faqih* and Khomeini's revolutionary worldview. Montazeri was [presumed](#) to be Khomeini's choice to succeed him, as his son and chief-of-staff, Ahmed Khomeini, had described him as the most suitable successor. Montazeri lacked the charisma and religious qualifications of Khomeini. However, he had been a loyal student of the Imam who ingratiated himself into his inner circle, sharing

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his radicalism and commitment to export the revolution. Khomeini's affection for Montazeri was so great that he frequently called him "[the fruit of my life.](#)"

Montazeri had been part of the revolutionary struggle against the Shah, enduring periods of imprisonment and exile. Upon establishing the Islamic Republic, he was made Tehran's first Friday prayer leader and served as the President of the Assembly of Experts that produced Iran's 1979 constitution. After these prominent postings, however, he faded from the political scene and was quickly overshadowed by other clerics such as Khamenei, Beheshti, Rafsanjani, and Mousavi. It was believed that Montazeri, a soft-spoken religious leader, had little interest in power politics. In many ways, this lack of personal ambition made him an ideal candidate for the Supreme Leader post, as his only concern would be with upholding the ideals of the Islamic Revolution.

The second faction in the Assembly of Experts preferred a leadership council to take over the role of the Supreme Leadership after Khomeini's passing. Those advocating this path felt that there was no worthy successor to Khomeini and that a council would allow representation from multiple factions, helping mend the split between left and right and ensuring that the leadership would need to commit to compromise, which would, in turn, ensure a moderate approach to governance.

According to a 1983 [CIA assessment](#), Rafsanjani and Khamenei were two of the key power brokers jockeying for personal power and influence over the trajectory of the post-Khomeini Islamic Republic. Neither had the religious qualifications to succeed Khomeini directly, so Rafsanjani favored Montazeri's succession, believing Montazeri could sideline the conservative clerics completely could manipulate Montazeri. With Montazeri likely to be isolated in Qom, Rafsanjani could become the dominant political influence in Tehran. Khamenei, meanwhile, favored a three-to-five-member leadership council, as he felt he would likely have close ties and ideological affinities with several of the likeliest choices to serve on the council, giving him a foothold for influence that he would lack if Montazeri assumed sole power.

After more than two years of deliberation, the Assembly of Experts announced that it had chosen Montazeri as the heir apparent for the Supreme Leadership in November 1985. Montazeri was also named deputy Supreme Leader, although Khomeini did not delegate many additional responsibilities to him, and the role was largely symbolic. Over time, particularly after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Montazeri fell out of favor with Khomeini, leading to a succession crisis. Unconcerned with his political fortunes, Montazeri became the most prominent voice in Iran, criticizing the government for its lack of military, economic, and political strategy in its conduct of the war. His time in the Shah's prisons had also imbued him with a genuine sensitivity to the plight of political prisoners detained unjustly and inhumanely, which had increasingly become a feature of the Islamic Republic during Khomeini's rule. He remained a passionate defender of *velayat-e faqih* but advocated for a more open system for political criticism and more direct democratic participation. In his view, the Islamic Republic under Khomeini had devolved into a dictatorship, and he expressed this view openly.

Things came to a head after the 1988 purge of Iranian prisoners. Montazeri opposed the spate of executions on moral and strategic grounds, arguing in a series of [private letters](#) to Khomeini that it was counter to the principles of Islam to execute one's captives, particularly when the arbitrary nature of the trials made it likely that innocent prisoners would likely be executed. In his view, the purge would turn

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international opinion against the Islamic Republic and become Iran's enduring legacy, harming the nation's interests. During this period, Montazeri also addressed judicial officials behind the purge campaign, urging them to reconsider. In leaked audio of this meeting that his family members released in 2016, Montazeri [warned](#) the judges, "In my view the biggest crime in the history of the Islamic republic, for which history will condemn us, has been committed at your hands. Your names will be written in history as criminals."

Khomeini was unmoved by Montazeri's opposition, maintaining that anyone who took up arms against the Islamic Republic deserved execution. Subsequently, Montazeri went increasingly public with his criticisms of the purges and the dictatorial evolution of the Islamic Republic itself. In early 1989, in a [speech](#) given as part of the national celebration marking the 10th anniversary of the revolution, Montazeri gave his most forceful denunciation of Khomeini's rule, an unprecedented rebuke from a prominent figure within the regime.

In his speech, Montazeri argued that Iran's revolutionary obstinacy had left it isolated in the world, that Khomeini's repression had broken the spirit of unity that existed in the early days of the revolution, and that the rudderless leadership of the war effort had led to defeat and needless deaths among the youth of the nation. He said that those who were committed to the ideals of the revolution should be free to criticize Iran's leadership without fear of persecution for straying from those ideals so long as their expression was in service of advancing the revolutionary cause. He concluded with his most incendiary attack yet, saying that if Khomeini's Islamic government required the country to compromise its values and principles, it was preferable not to have an Islamic government.

Montazeri's attack was a repudiation of the evolution of Khomeini's worldview. It contained echoes of a previous incident that had occurred in early 1988 regarding the issue of static vs. dynamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence). In this instance, Khomeini had ruled that the state could punish individuals or companies who were hoarding resources or not paying taxes without a trial, an expansion of executive powers. The conservative-dominated [Guardian Council](#) took exception and argued to Khomeini that his decree would open the door for the government to intervene in economic affairs outside the established framework of *sharia*. Khomeini reaffirmed his ruling, which prompted Ali Khamenei to give a sermon in which he stated his [understanding](#) of Khomeini's ruling was that "the government can require the employer to observe a series of regulations and duties, this does not mean that accepted Islamic decrees are no longer valid...the Imam has said that the government can order the employer to observe certain conditions, but the conditions must be within the framework of accepted Islamic decrees." Effectively, Khamenei said that the government was bound to act within the established Islamic law.

Khomeini responded with a rare rebuke of Khamenei carried by the state-run media apparatus. In Khomeini's formulation, which represented the final evolution of his political thought, the imperative of the survival of the Islamic state was paramount, superseding even the rules of Islam. The Supreme Leader could effectively pass any rule or decree that he deemed necessary to ensure the survival of the Islamic Republic. By nature of the divine authority of his Supreme Leadership, that rule would inherently become canonical under Islamic law. In issuing this corrective, Khomeini declared that the Supreme Leader's power was absolute and that the Supreme Leader was infallible.

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Despite the ugliness of the row, Khamenei accepted Khomeini's declaration of absolute power. Khomeini, loath to create a political crisis, indicated publicly that Khamenei retained his full confidence. The incident was instructive for Khamenei, who, after taking on the mantle of Supreme Leadership, has governed in an absolutist manner, placing his conception of the exigencies of the survival of the Islamic Republic above all other considerations, including established Islamic precedent. Thus, as Supreme Leader, Khamenei had resorted to repression without compunction and fought to usurp power from each president who had served under him when their agendas conflicted with his vision. Khamenei's adherence to Khomeini's vision also helps explain the extralegal steps Khamenei has taken in the twilight of his own Supreme Leadership to trample over the more democratic elements of the hybrid system he inherited and marginalize pragmatic voices to ensure that the Islamic Republic remains in the hands of its most strident, hardline partisans with leadership authority fully vested in the Supreme Leader and the IRGC.

Montazeri's broadsides against Khomeini and the increasingly anti-democratic system he had propagated poisoned whatever goodwill the Imam may have retained for his former favorite pupil. In early March, the letters Montazeri had penned to Khomeini criticizing the 1988 prison massacres were somehow [obtained](#) by exiled opposition leader and former first president of the Islamic Republic, Abolhassan Banisadr, in Paris and were broadcast by the international press. This leak alerted the world and the Iranian public to the extent of the Islamic Republic's criminality in carrying out the purges, which it had sought to keep under wraps. An enraged Khomeini summoned the [Assembly of Experts](#) to convene after the publication of Montazeri's letters and reexamine the issue of leadership after his death. Ahead of the meeting, Khomeini summoned several of the senior-most members of his inner circle, including the head of the Assembly, Ayatollah Meshkini, Rafsanjani, and Khamenei, to meet with him. The meeting attendees counseled Khomeini that it would harm the interests of the Islamic Republic to publicly remove Montazeri as designated successor since no other qualified individuals were waiting in the wings to replace him. At this point, Khomeini reportedly [replied](#), "but you have Mr. Khamenei who is eligible."

It is unclear whether Khomeini endorsed Khamenei in this manner or if Khomeini's endorsement was manufactured after the fact to justify Khamenei's succession despite his constitutional lack of suitability for the role. Regardless, the meeting between Khomeini and his inner circle led to Khamenei's selection as his designated successor.

Khomeini divulged in the meeting that he had written a scathing letter denouncing Montazeri that he intended to publicize. However, at the urging of the attendees, he decided to send the letter privately to Montazeri. The letter, which was eventually released, can be [read in full](#) in Baqer Moin's biography of Khomeini. In it, Khomeini tells Montazeri, "Since it has become clear that after me you are going to hand over this country, our dear Islamic revolution, and the Muslim people of Iran to the liberals, and through that channel to the hypocrites [the Mojahedin-e Khalq], you are no longer eligible to succeed me as the legitimate leader of the state. ... I swear to God from the start I was against choosing you as my successor, but at the time I did not realize you were so gullible. ... If you continue your deeds, I will definitely be obliged to do something about you. And you know me, I never neglect my obligation."

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Montazeri accepted his forced resignation, and on March 28, 1989, Khomeini made a public statement informing the Islamic Republic that he had opposed Montazeri's succession and accepted his resignation. This was the first the public learned of the discord behind the scenes among the upper echelons. Montazeri jarringly went from revered Grand Ayatollah and hope of the Islamic Republic to persona non grata overnight.

With Khomeini's health fading, the issue of succession became a pressing crisis, particularly due to the lack of a suitable candidate. Those who had obtained the level of *marja-e taghlid*, either opposed the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* or lacked the political and managerial acumen needed for the role. On April 24, 1989, Khomeini invoked his special powers as Supreme Leader to form a 25-member Assembly for Revising the Constitution, including Khamenei, Rafsanjani, and Mousavi. The Assembly set about amending the constitution for the first and only time in the Islamic Republic's history to smooth the succession process and clarify the government's power structure to ease the bottlenecks that had paralyzed policymaking during the 1980s.

On Khomeini's direct instruction, the Assembly did away with the provisions in Article 109 of the 1979 Constitution, which required the Supreme Leader to be a *marja-e taghlid* and allowed for a committee to assume the role without a qualified individual successor. This represented a major dilution of the *velayat-e faqih* position, as Khomeini theorized in his seminal work, *Islamic Government*. The Supreme Leader's authority was supposed to be derived from his established recognition as a leading religious authority and source of emulation in the Shi'a world, which made him a vessel capable of interpreting and carrying out God's will. In a [letter](#) responding to an inquiry of his views on the qualifications for a Supreme Leader from Ayatollah Meshkini, the head of the Assembly of Experts, dated April 29, 1989, Khomeini claimed that he never felt the Supreme Leader needed to be a *marja-e taghlid*. This was a self-serving revision of his life's work. Khomeini [wrote](#), "From the very beginning, I believed and insisted that there is no need for the requirements of *marja'iyat*. A pious mujtahid, who is approved by the esteemed Assembly of Experts shall suffice. ... In this case, he is the elected vali and his decree is binding."

Accordingly, the constitutional assembly amended Article 109 and required the Supreme Leader to possess sufficient scholarship to exercise Islamic jurisprudence and strong political and managerial acumen. Thus, the Supreme Leader would now be viewed more as a political than religious position. He would be more reliant on the state going forward to derive authority, as opposed to Islam, weakening the argument that Iran's reigning theocrat decreed by divine fiat. Khamenei backed these reforms, [arguing](#) that Khomeini's success in leading the Islamic Revolution and shepherding the Islamic Republic through its first decade was the result of his political wisdom and courage coupled with his jurisprudential expertise, rather than just his authority as a *marja*. Rafsanjani concurred, noting that by the time an individual reached the level of Grand Ayatollah, he would likely be too old and enfeebled to manage state affairs effectively. The Assembly also [removed](#) a provision requiring the Supreme Leader to be supported by the majority of the populace, claiming that because the Assembly of Experts was popularly elected, its selection inherently enjoyed popular support. In effect, claims going forward that the Supreme Leader ruled by divine will or popular acclaim were weakened by the dilution of the qualifications for the position.

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While the constitutional amendments weakened the *vali-e faqih's* religious and popular legitimacy, they simultaneously enhanced his political powers, setting the stage for the role to evolve in a more authoritarian, dictatorial direction. The most consequential new power granted to the Supreme Leader was the authority to set and supervise the general policies of the Islamic Republic in accordance with his vision for the nation's best interests. The republican elements would carry out the day-to-day administrative functions and have a policy-making role, but effectively, they would work to carry out the Supreme Leader's overarching agenda. The Supreme Leader was also [placed in charge](#) of commanding the armed forces, declaring war and peace, and controlling leadership appointments within the military and security forces, judiciary, and state media apparatuses.

The new constitution also sought to streamline the Islamic Republic's republican governance. Rafsanjani, the presumptive favored nominee in the presidential elections later that year, sought to use his influence in the constitutional assembly to weaken the *faqih* and strengthen the presidency. He [argued](#) that the Supreme Leader should not have a major policy role, as that would render the president and *majles* superfluous, and that the Supreme Leader should only serve a 10-year term, but was overruled on both counts. His efforts to strengthen the presidency, however, bore fruit. Khamenei, who had been hamstrung by the weakness of the president's office throughout his term, backed Rafsanjani's reforms. At the same time, Mousavi, who had done the bulk of the hamstringing, led the opposition. Ultimately, Khamenei and Rafsanjani won out, and the president's powers were expanded while the position of prime minister was eliminated. The president took over the prime minister's role and was now the primary seat of power for day-to-day policymaking. The president was additionally placed in charge of cabinet formation, given increased economic and foreign policy powers, and was in charge of the planning and budget organization and [the Supreme National Security Council \(SNSC\)](#), which coordinates defense, intelligence, and foreign policy.

Khamenei's Succession

Ayatollah Khomeini died on June 3, 1989, leaving a leadership void at the top of the Islamic Republic. The amendments to the constitution, which diluted the qualifications for the supreme leadership, had not yet been ratified, but the situation's urgency required decisive action. The Assembly of Experts convened on June 4 to designate Khomeini's successor. The meetings were classified and shrouded in secrecy, but it is believed that Rafsanjani [engineered](#) Khamenei's rise, believing in his ability to manipulate the new Supreme Leader and remain the true power broker in the Islamic Republic. Rafsanjani had demurred at accepting the position, as he believed he would face allegations of conspiring to remove Montazeri.

According to Khomeini biographer Baqer Moin, "[Sheikh Sadeq Khalkhali](#) was the man who publicly mentioned Khamenei's name for the first time. He gave an account of a conversation with Khamenei, in which he had made the suggestion and received the reply: 'I won't accept it. This is a grave responsibility.'" Khamenei's stated reluctance to accept the position echoed his humility when he balked at assuming the presidency and cast him in a favorable light as someone who did not harbor grand ambitions but instead accepted the yoke of leadership at times when the survival of the Islamic Republic was at stake. For all of his self-effacement, however, Khamenei has adeptly maneuvered throughout his tenure to thrive in office and gain ever more power.

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Once Khamenei's name had been put forward, the Assembly debated his suitability. According to a later account by Rafsanjani, it was Rafsanjani who took the lead in speaking on behalf of Khamenei's potential candidacy, informing the Assembly that Khomeini himself had endorsed him at a meeting with senior political leadership several months before his death. According to [Rafsanjani](#), "A discussion ensued and we said to the Imam, if the need arose for a successor to you we would have difficulties, because with the present constitution, we could have a leadership vacuum. He said that this would not be the case since we had the right people. When we asked who, he pointed to Mr. Khamenei. ... Following that session Mr. Khamenei asked us, in fact insisted, that we did not talk about this issue outside. We did not repeat it anywhere."

Informed that Khamenei was Khomeini's preferred choice to take over as Supreme Leader, the Assembly of Experts approved his candidacy, voting 60-14 in favor of his succession. Khamenei was the youngest potential successor put forth before the Assembly for consideration, assuming power just shy of his 50th birthday. Given his relative youth, lack of charisma, and dearth of religious qualification, Khamenei faced a steep uphill battle to be taken seriously in the role by ordinary Iranians as well as the country's clerical elite, whom he was now ostensibly in control of, despite being outranked in terms of age, religious scholarship, and influence among the faithful.

Khamenei was keenly aware that he lacked the religious qualifications for the role. It later appeared that he had even tried to talk the Assembly of Experts out of giving him the job. However, this was likely a case of false modesty that played into the mythmaking of Khamenei as a reluctant leader who rose to the occasion when his services were needed. Speaking of his election, [Khamenei said](#),

"I have always counted myself unworthy of critical and high-level positions. I have viewed myself lower than them and even much lower positions such as presidency and other responsibilities during the revolution. Of course, those hours after the death of the Imam were very difficult for all of us. Out of their sense of responsibility, brethren were trying to find a solution. They continuously named me as a candidate for leadership, which I continuously dismissed in my mind. ... From the bottom of my heart I did not want to be designated for this position.

Finally, after lengthy discussions in the Assembly of Experts, my name came up as a candidate and they picked me. I first dismissed it and went to the Assembly to address them on this issue. I talked to them about all the reasons why I should not be picked for this position. No matter how much I insisted, they rejected my proposal. They had an answer for every reason I offered. So, I realized it was no use and accepted the nomination.

Even now, I consider myself an ordinary student and cleric, not only for this task but any task. But now that the responsibility has been placed on my shoulders, I shall carry it with all my strength, to the best of my ability with God's grace and mercy. So, I prayed to God and committed myself to start this position by relying on His help, and He has helped me to this day."

Years later, as his government ruthlessly cracked down on protests over government mismanagement and lack of social and economic freedoms, snippets of footage from the deliberations of the Assembly of

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Experts were leaked in an effort to embarrass Khamenei and call his authority into question. In the [footage](#), Khamenei tells the Assembly, “We should shed tears of blood wailing for the Islamic society that has been forced to even propose me [as Supreme Leader].”

Khamenei’s Consolidation of Power

Despite his public show of reticence, Khamenei and political leaders such as Rafsanjani, who backed his ascension, immediately undertook to buttress Khamenei’s public image and sell him to the skeptical population and senior clerical elites once elected. Although his religious scholarship was lacking, Khamenei possessed excellent skills as a micromanager and an individual who understood the levers of power in the complex Iranian political system. Over the years, Khamenei has ensured that the heads of all the major institutions in the country – [the Assembly of Experts](#), [the Judiciary](#), [the Guardian Council](#), and [the IRGC](#), to name a few – are either handpicked or unfailingly loyal to him, and as a result, these institutions serve to enhance rather than check Khamenei’s power. The cultivation of patronage networks has been vital to his survival and accrual of power within Iran, and he has forged symbiotic relationships with two main power centers, the clerical bureaucracy and the senior leadership of the IRGC, which have served as the fount of his longevity. Additionally, he has been willing to use intimidation and outright repression when needed to advance his power and to put down threats to his political survival and that of the revolutionary regime.

Because the proposed amended constitution, which had eliminated the requirement that the *vali-e faqih* be a recognized *marja*, had not yet been ratified when Khomeini passed, Khamenei’s appointment as Supreme Leader lacked proper legal standing. Rafsanjani and other regime officials worked around this by instilling a measure of fear and [declaring](#) that disobedience to the new *faqih* would be seen as counterrevolutionary and would not be tolerated. To sell Khamenei as legitimate and cultivate support would require a methodical process of building up and consistently reinforcing the mythos around Khamenei. Because he was unremarkable in his own right, that mythos was centered on his ties to Khomeini, which were frequently embellished, and his ability to best carry forth Khomeini’s vision for the Islamic Republic.

Khamenei’s political allies portrayed him as worthy of carrying on Khomeini’s legacy by virtue of being Khomeini’s favored choice for Supreme Leader, whether that was the case or not. Khomeini’s son, Ahmad, was enlisted in the effort to legitimize Khamenei, [announcing](#) on June 6, “When Khamenei was traveling to North Korea, the Imam watched the reports of his trip on the television. He was impressed witnessing the welcome of the Korean people, his speeches and interviews. Then Imam said, ‘Surely he is worthy of leadership.’” Ayatollah Meshkini, the head of the Assembly of Experts, [declared](#) that Khamenei was the right person for the job based on his close connection to Khomeini, the important roles he had played during the Revolution and as president during the Iran-Iraq War, and his expertise on the “contemporary problems facing the Muslim world,” essentially conceding that his political acumen rather than his religious scholarship factored crucially into his designation as *velayat-e faqih*.

Khamenei’s political acumen and understanding of the levers of power within the Islamic Republic’s labyrinthine system have enabled him to amass unprecedented power in Iran. Selected partly because of his perceived weakness, Khamenei lacked the broad-based popular support and activist networks

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from which Khomeini derived much of his power. From the outset of his term, Khamenei built his independent support bases, eventually giving him pervasive control over every institution in the country.

Transformation of the Office of the Supreme Leader

Khamenei recognized the need to tread cautiously when he first assumed power, and he assured the political and clerical elites who loyally served Khomeini that they would retain their positions and status. As he grew more confident in the role of Supreme Leader, however, he began replacing many key officials, showing favoritism to the generation that came of age during the revolutionary period and Iran-Iraq War rather than his peer group, only tolerating those who “acknowledged their inferiority to him,” [according](#) to Khamenei biographer Mehdi Khalaji.

Khamenei’s first order of business was transforming the [Office of the Supreme Leader \(OSL\)](#) into a sprawling bureaucratic apparatus that, while secretive and opaque, effectively functions as the Islamic Republic’s nerve center. Whereas Khomeini presided over the Islamic Republic through sheer charisma and the authority afforded by his political and religious credentials, Khamenei took on a much more active role in the minutiae of governance by expanding the bureaucracy at his disposal and turning the OSL into the primary location from where all political, military, foreign, and domestic policy decision-making emanates. As the foremost political analyst and decision-maker in the land, Khamenei has preferred to staff his office with loyal commandants who provide him with raw information rather than sophisticated political advisors who would bring their own biases and factional considerations to bear. Khamenei’s inner circle of advisors acts as an echo chamber rather than challenging his worldview or decision-making.

One of Khamenei’s [innovations](#) was the creation of various institutions under the unaccountable control of the OSL, with functions that overlapped those of parallel institutions under the control of the republican elements of the state and the clergy. This has served to weaken the republican elements in the Iranian system and undermine the independence of religious seminaries to Khamenei’s benefit, allowing the Islamic Republic to evolve in a more dictatorial direction.

Khamenei reshaped the OSL into a mechanism for enforcing his authority in every province in the country and every government ministry and institution, including the *majles*, military, and clergy, by dispatching a network of loyal representatives who could act as his eyes and ears, and ensure that his bidding always prevailed. Khamenei additionally utilized the OSL to dispense patronage through the prodigious assets under its control, carving out fiefdoms for privileged family members and other clerical and military elites, which they could use to amass influence, ensuring their indebtedness to Khamenei. Khamenei effectively sits atop a massive informal economy, controlling a network of foundations and religious endowments known as *bonyads*, which benefit from governmental subsidies but are not subject to taxation or parliamentary oversight. The OSL has also been a vital instrument in subduing opposition and repressing dissent through its oversight and control of state security institutions.

Because of his insecurity over being accepted as the leading religious and political figure in Iran, Khamenei has prioritized loyalty to him as the main factor in staffing the OSL. He eschewed appointees

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with prominent ties to Khomeini in favor of creating an inner circle comprised of figures junior in stature to him whom he had familiarity with from his previous roles in the Islamic Republican Party, the defense ministry, and the presidency. For his chief of staff, he selected [Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani](#), a lower-ranking cleric who was one of the [founders of the intelligence ministry](#) and a former [deputy intelligence minister](#). His deputy chief of staff for intelligence and security affairs, [Asghar Mir-Hejazi](#), similarly came from the intelligence ministry before becoming Khamenei's enforcer. Such appointments would foreshadow Khamenei's securitization of the OSL, using the office's resources to keep [tabs on potential rivals and settle scores](#).

Khamenei's transformation of the OSL into the fulcrum of power in the Islamic Republic reflects his skill as a bureaucratic micromanager. Khamenei's primary preoccupation is always keeping and expanding his power, and he has masterfully sidelined potential rivals from the clergy and elected government to vest all key final decision-making authority in the OSL. The presidents who have served since Khamenei's assumption of power have had larger public profiles, especially regarding foreign perception. However, Khamenei is truly the operator behind the scenes, directing the ship of state in an unaccountable manner while setting up the presidents to absorb the brunt of dissatisfaction over Iran's endemic [corruption and mismanagement](#).

Quest for Religious Legitimacy

Khamenei understood that true longevity in the position would require more than trying to cloak himself in his predecessor's aura. Khamenei would eventually need to be seen as a legitimate religious authority and source of emulation in his own right, capable of issuing decrees that would carry weight with the Shi'a faithful. When he assumed the Supreme Leadership, Khamenei was politically precarious. However, the powers afforded him by dint of his position helped him quickly establish patronage links that gave him a base and networks of support. Still, the 1989 constitutional amendments had effectively created a fault line between religious and political authority in Iran by diluting the religious qualifications of the Supreme Leader. Khamenei's lack of religious credentials represented a potential vulnerability, especially if the clerical hierarchy sought to challenge his authority.

The Assembly of Experts recognized the need to buttress Khamenei's religious credentials to legitimize his rule. It pronounced him an Ayatollah (Sign of God) virtually [overnight](#), elevating him from the mid-ranking title of *hojatoleslam* (Authority of Islam). Khamenei sought to dress the part, eschewing his outward appearance as an intellectual, pipe-smoking cleric who wore a stylish cloak in favor of the more austere garb worn by traditional clerics.

Despite the vote of confidence in his leadership by the political echelon, the recognized *marjas* in Iran were slow to signal their approval of Khamenei as the highest authority in the land, given his junior religious credentials. A week passed after his election, and none had congratulated Khamenei, so Rafsanjani began applying pressure. Finally, a 95-year-old *marja*, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Araki, [sent Khamenei a series of complimentary letters](#), which Khamenei and his allies pounced on as a sign of his legitimacy. It is believed that Araki, who was theologically opposed to *velayat-e faqih* during his career, was not fully in control of his mental faculties then and that his son likely wrote the letters out of political expedience.

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Recognizing that he lacked the respect of the senior clergy, Khamenei moved slowly at first to build up his religious authority and then to exert control over the clerical bureaucracy. One of the most potent tools he had at his disposal was his control over the state's media apparatus, and he used this to build up a cult of personality around himself. State TV [broadcast Khamenei's image more vociferously than it had Ayatollah Khomeini's](#) to cultivate an image of holiness, and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) also distributed hundreds of thousands of posters, CDs, and other forms of media to tout him as an earthly deputy of the Hidden Imam and make him a ubiquitous presence in Iran.

Khamenei treaded cautiously during the first three years of his Supreme Leadership, not pressing to be regarded or followed as a religious authority in the early going. Over time, he would become increasingly assertive in that regard, but at the beginning, the institution of the Supreme Leadership was decoupled from the realm of dispensing *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), with the [senior grand ayatollahs and major seminaries under their control given latitude to operate largely independently](#) and issue rulings which would be binding on their followers with minimal interference from the state. Khamenei was armed with his predecessor's decree that the interests of the Islamic Republic superseded established Islamic Law, which would, in theory, enable the Supreme Leader to overrule the *fatwas* of more senior clerics, but he refrained from doing so at first to avoid a clerical mutiny.

As he became more politically secure in the *velayat-e faqih* role, Khamenei began to test the waters of expanding his religious authority. In March 1992, he issued his [first fatwa](#), ruling that it was permissible to transplant an organ from a living individual who was functionally braindead if the transplant would save a life. Fearing political repercussions, the senior grand ayatollahs opted not to challenge Khamenei's ruling, paving the way for him to begin occasionally weighing in on matters of *fiqh*.

Several grand ayatollahs died quickly during the early 1990s, moving Khamenei up the clerical pecking order with each passing. His deputies, most notably Judiciary head Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, a staunch Khamenei loyalist, urged the followers of these ayatollahs to [transfer their loyalty and charitable contributions to Khamenei after each successive death](#), with hopes of eventually positioning him as the sole *marja-e taghlid* in the country. In [Yazdi's view](#), because an Islamic state had now been established, it was no longer appropriate to have multiple sources of emulation. Having *marjas* outside of the governmental apparatus risked the issuance of religious decrees that would flout government policy or otherwise encroach on political affairs. For Khamenei to truly be the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, it was therefore vital to recognize him as the sole *marja* and fuse religious and political authority in the singular personage of the *velayat-e faqih*. This would strengthen the Khomeinist foundations of the Islamic Republic, augment Khamenei's power domestically, and legitimize Qom as the epicenter of Shi'ism. The Shi'a clerical hierarchy, both within and outside of Iran, opposed Khamenei's line-jumping. However, Yazdi's efforts to coronate him failed to gain traction.

In November 1994, Ayatollah Mohammad-Ali Araki, the prevailing senior-most *marja-e taghlid* in Iran, passed away. Khamenei's state-controlled media organs orchestrated a [propaganda campaign](#) calling for Khamenei to be recognized as his successor despite his lack of qualifications. Khamenei's opponents derided his nomination as akin to an attempted coup and an unprecedented encroachment of politics into the religious sphere. Still, the clergy could not rebuff Khamenei too harshly. As a compromise, the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers put forward seven acceptable candidates to be followed as a *marja-e*

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taghlid, including Khamenei. This marked an elevation for Khamenei to the rank of grand ayatollah but was also a setback as he had set his sights on becoming the sole *marja-e taghlid* in Iran. To save face, Khamenei announced that his duties as Supreme Leader were too taxing to seek to become a *marja* within Iran, but he unilaterally insisted he was to be recognized as a *marja* outside of the country.

Stymied in his efforts to amass religious authority on the merits of his credentials, Khamenei changed tacks and applied his penchant for micromanagement to remaking the Iranian clerical bureaucracy so that he became indispensable as its head. Khamenei benefited because the senior-most grand ayatollahs in the country, while opposed to *velayat-e faqih*, were largely depoliticized. Khamenei worked to increase their reliance on the state for funds and utilized intimidation to ensure they would not speak out too forcefully against his Supreme Leadership. As he grew comfortable in the position, Khamenei sought to streamline the country's sprawling and disjointed clerical apparatus under the aegis of the Office of the Supreme Leader. The deaths of several successive Grand Ayatollahs who had been respected and prominent advocates of maintaining clerical independence from the state cleared the resistance to Khamenei exerting full control over the clergy.

As early as 1991, Khamenei called for creating a body within the OSL that would oversee the clergy, ensuring its unity and alignment with Islamic Revolutionary theology and values. In an [address](#) marking his first visit to Qom as Supreme Leader, he declared his intention to instrumentalize the clergy on behalf of the regime, saying, "Seminaries and religious men cannot be indifferent toward the government and political affairs...This [government] belongs to you, to the clergy, religion; you have no choice. This is an Islamic republic. If you keep a distance, the republic becomes non-Islamic." Khamenei noted that the clergy faced economic uncertainty and pledged to invest his offices' resources toward providing health insurance and housing, increasing the clergy's dependence on Khamenei and the state.

In 1995, Khamenei's vision came to fruition as he established the Supreme Council of Religious Seminaries of Qom. The Supreme Council is responsible for the day-to-day administration of Iran's seminaries, including control over their finances. Its members are recommended by the nominally independent Society of Qom Seminary Teachers, but all must be approved by Khamenei and the *marja* of Qom, ensuring there is no deviance from the Supreme Leader's worldview and commitment to *velayat-e faqih*. The creation of the Supreme Council paved the way for Khamenei and the OSL to assert dominance over the religious sphere in the Islamic Republic, wresting power away from the major seminaries and recognizing grand ayatollahs.

The Supreme Council created a standardized curriculum adopted by all the Shi'a seminaries under its control, as well as a network of research institutes and libraries affiliated with seminaries that are also under the Supreme Council's control, ensuring that all intellectual thought coming out of Iran's seminaries was in line with Khomeinist ideology. [According](#) to Khamenei biographer Mehdi Khalaji, himself a former Qom seminarian who followed Ayatollah Montazeri, because of Khamenei's efforts to centralize control of the clergy, "The role of traditional centers of religious authority – which operated as a religious and political check on the newly formed hierocracy – correspondingly went into steep decline, and a younger generation of clerics reared in Khomeini's republic came to occupy positions of great religious and political influence."

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Khalaji further [elucidates](#) how Khamenei's reorganization of the clerical bureaucracy increasingly eroded the independence of the country's *marjas* by creating a "modern, digitized system that exerts control over clerics' private lives, public activities, and political orientation." *Marjas* formerly had independent offices from which they would make payments to clerics under their guidance, but under Khamenei, all payments became computerized and centralized and required the knowledge and approval of Khamenei's representatives. Furthermore, Khamenei has used the prodigious assets under his control to assert his financial and religious supremacy over the established *marjas*, paying clerics much higher salaries than the *marjas* were able to out of state and OSL coffers. When he declared himself a *marja* outside Iran's borders, he was able to collect alms and access resources from the endowments of rich Shi'a communities in Kuwait and the Gulf, which he used to further pad the OSL's discretionary budget.

Accordingly, the *marjas'* independence has been eroded as Khamenei has become the main financier of Iranian clerics. The Islamic Republic of Iran's revolutionary regime has usurped the *marjas'* religious authority to become the dominant authority over the clergy, leading most *marjas* to align with the government and the notion of *velayat-e faqih*. This state of affairs has transformed the clergy into a patronage system with Khamenei at the head, fueling corruption. [According](#) to Khalaji, "The government underwrites a hefty budget for religious institutions, making today's Iranian clerical establishment the wealthiest of any period in history. Well-connected clerics and *marjas* within the Islamic Republic are involved in lucrative business deals, receive exclusive governmental benefits, and can borrow large amounts of money from banks without sufficient guarantees for repayment. Many charities owned by *marjas* in Iran and high-ranking clerics engage in business through corrupt dealings with the government."

To further ensure the hegemony of Khomeinist principles in Iran's religious life, in 1993, Khamenei created the [Friday Prayer Policymaking Council](#), bureaucratizing his control over the selection and oversight of the Friday prayer leaders dispatched to every province in Iran. The council produces weekly bulletins and disseminates talking points to hundreds of preachers around the country, giving Khamenei a powerful mechanism to amplify his worldview and disseminate his views on the pressing religious, social, and political issues of the day. In effect, the council and the army of Friday prayer leaders function like Khamenei's personal political party, enabling him to organize and conduct outreach to Iranian citizens using the tens of thousands of mosques in the country. Because the Friday prayer leaders are integrated within their respective communities, they serve as an additional set of eyes and ears monitoring activities within the mosques, which serve as the main centers for communal life throughout Iran. Khamenei has focused on [appointing younger clerics](#) in their mid-30s to 40s to Friday prayer leader positions, incentivizing younger seminary students to toe the regime's line and demonstrate fealty to Khamenei and the Islamic Revolution in hopes of receiving one of these plum appointments. This has ensured that the generation of clerics that came of age after the revolution replicated Khomeinist ideology.

Beyond centralizing his control over the clerical establishment and doling out financial incentives, Khamenei has also used repression and intimidation to keep the clergy in line. In 1987, Ayatollah Khomeini created the Special Court of Clergy, a parallel justice system for the clergy that operates outside Iran's regular judiciary under the complete control of the Supreme Leader. Khomeini created the

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court as a means of sanctioning dissident clerics, but Khamenei has [expanded the court's purview](#) from Tehran to cities around the country and commissioned the creation of a parallel prison system tied to the clerical court. Under Khamenei, the court has acted with more [flagrant disregard for established legal norms and procedures](#) than the secular judiciary, meting out humiliating punishment, imprisonment, and even executions to hundreds of clerics for essentially political offenses at Khamenei's whim. In addition to the special clerical court, Khamenei has used the [intelligence ministry](#) to monitor Iranian clerics' public and private lives. These intimidation and repression tactics deter clerics from deviating from the regime's ideology or challenging Khamenei's authority and legitimacy.

While he could not command the respect of his peers to become a *marja* in his own right, Khamenei used his managerial acumen and penchant for repression to construct new layers of bureaucracy, which ensured the fealty of the clergy to his rule. As a theocratic regime, the Islamic Republic of Iran relies on the clerical bureaucracy and its foot soldiers to promulgate its ideology at home and abroad and serve as the wellspring for the *velayat-e faqih's* legitimacy. Whereas the clergy was formerly renowned for its diversity of thought and independence from the state, Khamenei used repression and control of the purse strings to ensure the near-unanimous support of the clergy for the regime's ideology and his rule as Supreme Leader. The clergy has thus been susceptible to corruption and effectively coopted as a tool for population control. Paradoxically, however, the erosion of the clergy's independence has undermined the institution's legitimacy over time and thus weakened its ability to promote the regime and Khamenei's political authority. As such, the clergy has ceded power over time to the IRGC, portending Iran's evolution into a military dictatorship with a clerical veneer.

Khamenei's Tenure as Supreme Leader

Throughout Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's tenure as Supreme Leader, his central preoccupations have been amassing more power, ensuring the continuity of Iran's revolutionary regime, and gaining the upper hand for his hardline conservative ideology in the factional disputes over the Islamic Republic's trajectory. Khamenei himself has proven a nimble autocrat adept at navigating the vicissitudes of Iran's dynamic political terrain. Gradually, he penetrated all of Iran's main power centers, installing his men and ensuring institutions such as the judiciary, intelligence and security services, and the IRGC and military were aligned with his agenda. They could be wielded as tools to intimidate and punish their opponents. At times when Khamenei was personally weak among the political and clerical elites, or when popular opinion demanded, he evinced a pragmatic streak, half-heartedly pursuing policy paths personally disagreeable to him, such as greater openness domestically and internationally. After undermining each of these attempts at reform or moderate Iran's revolutionary regime, Khamenei would revert to his tried-and-true playbook of repression and belligerence.

In the twilight years of his life, Khamenei's hostility to the republican elements of the Islamic Republic has come to the fore, and he has shed any pretense of commitment to reforming the system. By engineering the 2021 election of [Ebrahim Raisi](#), who was widely believed to be his favored candidate to succeed him, Khamenei has heavy-handedly moved to sideline pragmatic and reformist voices once and for all and ensure that the country upholds his hardline legacy after he departs the scene.

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Khamenei's machinations to assert personal and ideological dominance over the Iranian political scene can best be understood by examining his relationships with the presidents who have served under him. Apart from Iran's current president, Ebrahim Raisi, who was elevated largely based on his loyalty to Khamenei and acted as a rubber stamp for the Supreme Leader, each president assumed office, claiming popular mandates and seeking to enact an independent agenda. Khamenei provided significant latitude during their first terms to pursue signature initiatives. All the while, Khamenei oversaw the devolution of the Islamic Republic into an increasingly repressive and closed society, backed Iran's transformation into the world's foremost [state sponsor of terrorism](#), and pursued an illicit suspected nuclear weapons program, leading to Iran's international isolation and spreading immiseration among the Iranian populace. Khamenei has used the presidents, who have had larger public profiles than he, as a vector for public anger to shield himself from accountability. Each president thus ended his second term disgraced and out of favor with Khamenei and the ruling regime.

The end of the Iran-Iraq War and the subsequent death of Ayatollah Khomeini on June 3, 1989, ushered in a period of uncertainty for the Islamic Republic. The war effort and the singular personage of Khomeini had been the central unifying and stabilizing force in Iranian post-revolutionary society, and the regime had to navigate a transition from radicalism and war footing to peacetime and reconstruction. Khomeini's charisma gave him unique authority to strike a balance between Iran's political factions, letting the conservatives and Islamic Left each play an active role in governance without either faction fully dominating the other. In his absence, the conservatives had the upper hand, given the institutional levers of power under their control.

The conservatives' control over the Guardian Council and Assembly of Experts, as well as the upper ranks of the Khomeinist clergy after the marginalization of Ayatollah Montazeri, allowed this faction to engineer Khamenei's appointment to the Supreme Leadership. The 1989 constitutional amendments had strengthened the role of the *faqih* and had also done away with the post of prime minister in favor of a stronger, centralized presidency. The Islamic Left's primary wellspring of power in Iranian politics was its control of the *majles*, and in turn, the prime minister position, which it had now lost. In the aftermath of Khomeini's death, the left was unable to muster any opposition as the conservative-dominated Guardian Council maneuvered to ensure that power would be effectively split between two of his closest lieutenants, Khamenei as Supreme Leader and Rafsanjani as president.

The Rafsanjani Presidency

Former *majles* speaker Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected to the newly empowered presidency on July 28, 1989, in a non-competitive election, amassing nearly 95 percent of the vote after the Guardian Council allowed only two of 79 applicants to stand for election. The Islamic Left still controlled the *majles* and succeeded in installing one of its own, Mehdi Karrubi, as Rafsanjani's replacement as speaker. A constitutional referendum was held in conjunction with the election to ratify the proposed amendments, with more than [97 percent voting](#) in favor of the changes, according to regime figures. The passage of the amendments retroactively legitimized Khamenei's unconstitutional succession to the Supreme Leadership. They erased doubts that his appointment may have been temporary, paving the way for him to retain the office indefinitely. Even with the institutional hurdles removed, longevity in the position would require shrewd political acumen.

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At the outset of his succession, Khamenei lacked not only clerical bona fides but also Khomeini's political popularity and authority and had to move cautiously to buttress his position. Khamenei recognized that some of his modernist idiosyncrasies displayed as president would not serve him as Supreme Leader, as he relied on the backing of the traditionalist-dominated clergy to legitimize his rule and the *velayat-e faqih* system. Khamenei knew the other pillar of support he needed to cultivate was the IRGC. One of his first decisions was to retain [Mohsen Rezaei](#) as commander of the IRGC, and he expanded his existing ties with the IRGC to further solidify his base of support. Khamenei's alignment with the traditionalist conservatives and IRGC led to him adopting a hardline disposition as Supreme Leader from the outset, which has stuck with him throughout his tenure.

Rafsanjani shared a conservative outlook with Khamenei but had forged his path as a "pragmatist," leading a coalition known as the "modern-right." Rafsanjani's [coalition](#) was backed by an emerging social group of technocrats and the *nouveau riche* who sought a society with religious influence but did not favor repressive state enforcement of strict religious adherence, in contrast to the more hardline, traditionalist conservative devotees of [Khomeinism](#). The "modern-right's" focus was largely economic, favoring free-market liberalizing reforms and the privatization of much of the state-controlled industries. They sought to move Iran away from an informal, bazaar-led economy in favor of creating a modern, industrialized state and backed ties with the West to achieve this vision.

Lacking Rafsanjani's vast connections, political gravitas, and authority, Khamenei had no choice but to ally with him at the outset of his presidency, giving Rafsanjani a wide berth to direct the course of Iran's post-war reconstruction phase. As Khamenei found his footing in the early going, it was clear that Rafsanjani was the dominant figure in the diarchy. However, the constitutional powers vested in the Supreme Leader gave Khamenei a powerful trump card and the eventual upper hand.

The Iran-Iraq war had devastated the country and destroyed its most important industries and infrastructure, including the country's main port at Khorramshahr, the Abadan oil refinery, and the Kharg loading facility. According to Iran expert [Nikki Keddie](#), "Problems like inflation, unemployment, deficit spending, overwhelming dependence on oil, and declining agricultural self-sufficiency were worse than ever." Rafsanjani recognized that successful reconstruction would require Iran to moderate its foreign policy bellicosity, liberalize the economy, and allow limited social reforms to create conditions that would stimulate economic growth and attract foreign aid and investment. It was also crucial for Iran to be perceived as politically stable, necessitating a smooth transition at the top echelons post-Khomeini and the minimization of political infighting.

As the weaker figure in the diarchy, Khamenei largely supported Rafsanjani's pragmatic efforts to restore détente with the Arab world and Europe and implement limited domestic reforms, particularly in women's rights. However, tensions between Khamenei's and Rafsanjani's worldviews could only be papered over for so long. Khamenei's top two priorities as Supreme Leader were inherently contradictory; on the one hand, he sought national rebuilding, which required liberalization; and on the other, he sought to buttress Iran's commitment to the Islamic Revolution and Khomeinist principles with renewed fervency.

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Speaking at Rafsanjani's inauguration in August 1989, Khamenei clarified that the Islamic Republic would never waver from its revolutionary DNA despite the new president's calls for a more responsible Iran on the international stage. "There are those who suggest that Iran has entered into a new era with a new orientation. I assure you, Iran continues on the path of the Islamic Revolution and has not diverted from its [revolutionary] ideals," Khamenei [intoned](#). Khamenei also poured cold water on establishing diplomatic ties with the U.S., which Rafsanjani ultimately saw as necessary for the Iranian reconstruction project because he believed the U.S. was inherently hostile to the Islamic Republic and sought regime change rather than simply behavioral change. He remarked during his address, "Questions have been raised, until when Iran will refuse diplomatic relations with the U.S. The answer is the same as Imam Khomeini gave – until such a time that the U.S. terminates its policy of force, tyranny, oppression and hostility, and support of the enemies of the Islamic Republic and the Zionist regime."

Rafsanjani's Reformist Agenda and Corruption



(L-R) President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#)

As he set forth on his mission to rebuild Iran and prop up its failing economy, Rafsanjani appointed a cabinet primarily comprised of technocrats loyal to him, with Khamenei opting not to use his veto power over Rafsanjani's selections. Rafsanjani saw the need for Iran to tamp down on its revolutionary extremism to rebuild speedily and exhorted that Iran "[cannot build dams with slogans](#)." While Khamenei remained publicly committed to the extremism of the Islamic Revolution and continued his fiery rhetoric, he nevertheless gave Rafsanjani the backing he needed to carry out his agenda. Khamenei's idealistic extremism gave the

impression of tensions between his worldview and Rafsanjani's pragmatic commitment to technocratic nation-building, but in reality, Khamenei's style complemented Rafsanjani's, assuaging his most hardcore revolutionary supporters without preventing Iran from rebranding as a more moderate, responsible actor on the world stage. This good-cop, bad-cop dynamic would repeatedly serve Iran, convincing Western audiences that Khamenei was playing to his base and that it was necessary to cooperate with and appease Iran to empower more moderate forces in the Islamic Republic's government.

While Khamenei lacked the power to marginalize Rafsanjani and Iran desperately needed rebuilding, Khamenei put aside his hardline disposition and worked cooperatively. President Rafsanjani's signature initiative inaugurated a five-year development plan, which could not have been done without the Supreme Leader's acquiescence. With Iran's currency reserves depleted, Rafsanjani led Iran through a series of structural reforms to reorient Iran as a market economy and secure needed International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank loans. Rafsanjani's measures aligned with these institutions' best practices and included reopening the Tehran stock exchange, cutting government subsidies, raising taxes, devaluing the national currency, promoting trade liberalization and increasing exports, and

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privatizing nationalized industries. In addition to economic liberalization, Rafsanjani [relaxed social and cultural controls as well](#), and the government largely tolerated women wearing brightly colored veils and makeup, public socialization between the sexes, the proliferation of banned satellite dishes, and the flourishing of the arts, as well as literary and intellectual journals. Rafsanjani's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Mohammad Khatami, who would succeed him as president, oversaw much of the social reforms during this period.

Rafsanjani's reforms were largely intended to coopt the bourgeoisie, giving them new chances to profit and become consumers. Whereas Ayatollah Khomeini had called on Iranians to sacrifice and embrace asceticism to meet the revolutionary demands of the war with Iraq, Rafsanjani [justified](#) the bazaaris flooding Iran with imported products and the creation of a consumerist ethic, stating, "Why should you forbid yourself things that God made permissible?... God's blessing is for the people and the believers. Asceticism and disuse of holy consumption will create deprivation and a lack of drive to produce, work and develop."

While Rafsanjani's embrace of neoliberal reforms stimulated economic growth, the benefits tended to accrue to the wealthy and well-connected, increasing the gap between the rich and the rest of society. The middle and lower class were also negatively affected by increased taxes and the cutting of subsidies. However, efforts at privatization were plagued by endemic corruption, as the spoils went primarily to elites with whom Khamenei and Rafsanjani sought to cultivate patronage links. This need for patronage links served to hamstring Iran's development and curtail widespread privatization, which led to the state retaining a central role in the economy. The more market-oriented Rafsanjani had set a goal of reducing the sector by 8 percent, but it [instead grew by 3 percent](#) during the early 1990s, driven by the IRGC and the labyrinthine system of *bonyads* taking over the operation of numerous semi-public enterprises.

Rafsanjani's family benefited tremendously from the regime's corruption, building up an opaque network of foundations and front companies. The family's holdings included Iran's largest copper mine, a company that dominated Iran's lucrative pistachio export sector, an oil engineering firm, and an automobile factory. Rafsanjani's relatives were also selected for key politically advantageous posts, including the provincial governor of Kerman province, positions in the oil ministry, and director of Iran's main state-owned TV network. The vast wealth accrued by his family buttressed Rafsanjani's political power but also created vulnerabilities that Khamenei would exploit as part of his politically expedient crackdown on corruption when his relationship with Rafsanjani soured.

During Rafsanjani's initial five-year development plan, the IRGC came to take on an outsized role in Iran's economy. Initially, Khamenei and Rafsanjani were concerned with the [IRGC encroaching into the political realm](#). They sought to make them an economic powerhouse to bribe them to constrain their political ambitions effectively. Khamenei signed off on transforming the IRGC's engineering corps, which had been primarily engaged in the rapid construction of fortifications and bridges during the war, into a megalith construction consortium known as [Khatam Al-Anbiya \(KAA\)](#). KAA was given a virtual monopoly on projects related to Iran's reconstruction, including [revamping oil and gas infrastructure and constructing dams, roads, tunnels, and water transfer projects](#). In addition to co-opting the IRGC's top brass, KAA served as a jobs program for thousands of IRGC conscripts who had returned from the frontlines with scant employment prospects, ensuring their loyalty to the regime. The IRGC [framed its](#)

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[transition](#) of spearheading Iran's development and entering the economic realm as the continuation of its revolutionary mission to ensure the supremacy of the Islamic Revolution over Western cultural encroachment and imperialism. Iran's economic modernization became the frontline of a new holy mission, as Iran's development into an economic powerhouse would serve as a rebuke to the U.S.'s desire to weaken or replace the revolutionary regime.

Khamenei and his traditionalist backers chafed against some social reforms during this period. Likewise, the bazaari constituency aligned with Khamenei's emerging coalition opposed some aspects of Rafsanjani's industrialization-focused economic agenda, as modern trade centers threatened their more traditional informal mercantilism. Regardless, Khamenei maintained his alliance with Rafsanjani primarily to marginalize the Islamic left. Whereas Khomeini sought to balance the right and left factions, Khamenei has sought to dominate the left wherever possible. However, he has proven adept at providing the left space to operate when backed into a corner. Through its control of the *majles*, the main lever of power available to it at the time, the Islamic Left sought to hamstring Rafsanjani's economic agenda, which they saw as contributing to the spread of corruption and rising inequality. The Islamic Left's opposition threatened to derail Rafsanjani's transformative economic agenda and suggested political instability, which imperiled foreign trade and investment inflows.

While the early Rafsanjani years sparked optimism for economic and social liberalization, the specter of infighting and instability made political liberalization unpalatable. Working through the Islamic Republican system, Khamenei and Rafsanjani conspired to neutralize the left. In the 1992 *majles* elections, Khamenei endorsed the Guardian Council's decision to disqualify nearly 1,000 candidates, predominantly on the left, including many prominent sitting members of parliament. Speaker Mehdi Karroubi was among those banned from running. The left decried these summary disqualifications as signs of an emergent dictatorship but was powerless to prevent them. Those on the left who did stand for election did not fare well given the broad-based support for Rafsanjani's agenda, and [only 20 percent of incumbents retained their seats](#) as conservatives and pragmatists came to fully dominate the *majles*, with the hardliners as the most numerous faction. Karroubi was replaced as *majles* speaker by a hardline Khamenei backer, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri.

The 1992 Parliamentary Elections

The *majles* elections led to the first major realignment of Iranian politics under Khamenei's Supreme Leadership. Following its resounding defeat through largely anti-democratic means, the left's focus [turned toward reforming the Islamic Revolutionary system](#), emphasizing democracy, greater transparency in government, and respect for human and civil rights. In the foreign policy realm, the left partially abandoned its dogged anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism in favor of alignment with the ascendant Western-led liberal world order. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, whose statist, heavily centralized economic program the left had championed, the left saw that greater foreign policy openness and the embrace of some European and Western political and economic values were needed to drive political liberalization and guarantee its continued competitive participation in Iranian politics. While temporarily shut out of the political sphere, the Islamic Left, now known as the moderates and reformists, sought to cultivate intellectual and cultural influence, propagating their ideology through their outsized roles in academia, journalism, and the arts. Iran's rapidly shifting

demographics bolstered them; the population was becoming younger, more urban, and increasingly secular.

With the moderates and reformists vanquished from the political scene for the time being, the ideological and temperamental differences between Khamenei and Rafsanjani rose to the fore, and their henceforth cooperative relationship [developed into a rivalry](#). Khamenei feared Rafsanjani's expanding power as a threat to his own, and the time came for him to take back the upper hand. Khamenei benefitted in this respect from the perception that the president was responsible for the day-to-day administrative affairs of the country. Although he had signed off on Rafsanjani's plans to liberalize the economy, Rafsanjani's economic agenda failed to deliver the promised results, hamstrung by corruption, inflation, low oil prices, and the imposition of U.S. sanctions on Iran's energy sector, which limited oil exports.

The hardliners in the *majles*, who drew much of their support from the mercantilist bazaaris, a constituency opposed to Rafsanjani's economic agenda, moved to obstruct the five-year program with Khamenei's backing, forcing Rafsanjani to pursue much narrower economic reforms. The *majles* hardliners proved useful in checking Rafsanjani's powers, drawing them closer to Khamenei and, in turn, hardening Khamenei's ideological outlook. Rafsanjani had reestablished trade and diplomatic ties with much of the Arab world and Europe, but Khamenei and the hardliners remained steadfastly opposed to his proposed olive branch to Washington. Khamenei and his hardline backers, who came to be called the principlists, framed their mounting opposition to Rafsanjani's pragmatism as [a fight to uphold the principles of the Islamic Revolution](#), especially the notion of *velayat-e faqih*, which made Iran's government the sole outpost for true Islam. They argued that greater political and economic openness would lead to importing Western cultural values and imperil revolutionary steadfastness. A conservative backlash to Rafsanjani's social and economic liberalization ensued, with the morality police giving [carte blanche](#) to crack down on dress code violations and illegal satellite dishes.

With control of the *majles* in principlist hands, Khamenei sought to increasingly encroach on executive affairs previously left to Rafsanjani's sole purview. Working in tandem, the *majles* and Supreme Leader Khamenei [forced out a number of Rafsanjani's appointees to key ministries and replaced them with Khamenei loyalists](#). Most notably, Rafsanjani's reformist interior minister was ousted in favor of a principlist, increasing Khamenei's control over the Iranian security apparatus. Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Khatami was compelled to resign over the backlash Khamenei engineered in response to the social and press freedoms he had overseen. Khamenei initially installed one of his loyalists, [Ali Larijani](#), to the post instead of placing him in charge of the state-controlled [Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting](#), where he ousted Rafsanjani's brother, a direct affront to the sitting president. Khamenei also placed his allies in the judiciary and intelligence ministries, buttressing his ability to go after his rivals.

Rafsanjani's Second Term

Despite the burgeoning power struggle, in June 1993, Rafsanjani [handily won a second term as president](#), although his share of the vote shrunk from 95 percent in 1989 to 63 percent. Voter participation dropped precipitously from 70 percent to 56 percent, indicating frustration with Rafsanjani's failure to deliver economic benefits and the broader failures of the Islamic Republican

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system to achieve social and political reform. Khamenei and the hardliners would capitalize on Rafsanjani's lack of a strong popular mandate to further marginalize him during his second term.

The state's populist relationship with the lower classes, which included the provision of food and fuel subsidies, broke down during Rafsanjani's second term as he put in place austerity measures to stabilize Iran's moribund economy. As living standards declined, Iran faced sporadic labor unrest and riots over municipal efforts to crack down on illegal squatting.

The IRGC had initially backed Rafsanjani's economic development agenda, as the group benefitted from lucrative government contracts. However, the need to protect its economic interests led to it aligning fully with the Supreme Leader and becoming the leading bulwark against Rafsanjani's pragmatism and reformist ideology. [According](#) to security analyst Afshon Ostovar, an expert on the IRGC's role in Iranian society, "Initially, this meant supporting Rafsanjani (who encouraged and enabled the IRGC's economic role) and most of his policies; however, as Rafsanjani took measures in his second term aimed at undermining the bazaari merchants' monopoly on commercial pricing, the IRGC joined the traditional right (to which many of its commercial interests were linked) in opposition. Opposition to increased governmental oversight of the commercial sector, as well as resistance to the relaxation of Islamic social policies (also initiated by Rafsanjani, with support from the left) moved the IRGC into a firm alliance with the traditional right and their patron, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. By the mid-1990s, the IRGC actively worked against proponents of these issues, and became antagonistic toward reformism."

With hardliners firmly in control of the Supreme Leadership, the IRGC, the *majles*, and holding key posts throughout the Interior Ministry, judiciary, and intelligence ministries, Khamenei began taking Iran's foreign policy in an increasingly confrontational direction. During his first term, Rafsanjani had preached tamping down on Iran's bellicosity to foster the restoration of ties with the Arab world and Europe. Rafsanjani faced his first foreign policy test during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War of 1990-1991. While Iran still harbored enmity toward Saddam Hussein, there was a greater fear of the U.S. using the Kuwait crisis to permanently set up a U.S. military presence on Iran's doorstep. Khamenei and Rafsanjani worked together to guide Iran through a policy of "active neutrality." [According](#) to Professor [Mohsen Milani](#), "This prudent policy was based on the recognition that Iran had very limited ability to change the outcome of a conflict it had not started. Moreover, the government quickly realized that it could not prevent the United States from introducing its military forces in the Persian Gulf region. Rafsanjani, therefore, decided to keep Iran from becoming entangled in the unfolding conflict, and thus to protect Iran's slow rapprochement with Western Europe and with the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Active neutrality served both of these objectives."

Radicals on both the right and left wanted Iran to actively challenge the U.S. during the conflict. However, Khamenei recognized that Iran was in too weak a position for a military confrontation. He assuaged the radicals by rhetorically denouncing the U.S., assuring them that Iran had not been complacent toward Washington. By staying out of the war, one of its key adversaries was neutralized at no cost to Iran. Iran appeared a responsible actor and positive force for regional stability through its shuttle diplomacy.

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Rafsanjani sought to signal to the U.S. through Iran's responsible actions that he was open to dialogue and diplomacy. However, the Bush and Clinton administrations rebuffed Rafsanjani's overtures due to political pressures and Iran's sponsorship of terrorism. Lingering enmity from the hostage crisis and Khamenei's consistent rhetorical broadsides against the U.S. and Israel made Washington reticent to engage with Iran. As Khamenei moved away from pragmatism and cooperation with Rafsanjani in the wake of hardliners taking over the *majles*, Iran increasingly engaged in [international terrorism](#). Even during the early years of Rafsanjani's presidency, Iran conducted a number of extraterritorial raids and assassinations against regime opponents such as the MEK, Kurdish independence backers, and former officials such as Shapour Bakhtiar, the last prime minister of Iran before the revolution. By 1992, Iran began to undertake increasingly bold terrorist acts, including the [1992 Buenos Aires Israeli embassy bombing and the 1994 bombing](#) of an Argentine Jewish community center. Subsequent investigations by Argentinian officials accused Khamenei, Rafsanjani, and several other high-ranking officials, including foreign minister Velayati, Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, and IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei, of prior knowledge and a hand in the planning of the attacks.

Given Iran's role in terrorist acts, its opposition to U.S. efforts to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, its sponsorship of terrorist groups such as [Hamas](#), [Hezbollah](#), and [Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#), which opposed Israel's existence and frequently targeted civilians, and its pursuit of a nuclear weapons program, the Clinton administration rebuffed Rafsanjani's signals that he sought economic engagement with the U.S. In May 1993, the Clinton administration announced a policy of "[dual containment](#)," whereby it levied sanctions against both Iran and Iraq to ensure neither country could become a dominant player in the region. At that point, some business was still permitted between the U.S. and Iran, and trade had risen slowly following the end of the Iran-Iraq War. In 1995, President Rafsanjani made his largest overture to the U.S., offering oil giant Conoco a billion-dollar deal to develop an Iranian offshore oil field. Under pressure from Congress, President Clinton used executive orders to scuttle the deal, and a raft of secondary sanctions followed suit from Congress, including the unanimously passed Iran-Libya Sanctions Act of 1996, which forbade European countries from large investments in Iran's energy sector. America's cold shoulder to Rafsanjani's efforts at rapprochement solidified Khamenei's position that Rafsanjani was misguided for seeking accommodation with the U.S.

Revolutionary Backlash

With his major foreign policy goal of outreach to the U.S. stalled and his program of social liberalization imperiled by a reactionary backlash, Rafsanjani feared the balance of power in Iran shifting too far in favor of the hardline principlist conservatives. On the eve of the 1996 *majles* elections, Rafsanjani announced the creation of a new political organization, the [Executives of Construction](#), which advocated for entrepreneurship and economic liberalization over revolutionary zeal. The creation of this organization presaged Rafsanjani's abandoning his faltering alliance with the principlists in favor of one of the reformists. Despite the Guardian Council again disqualifying many candidates from the left and some more radical leftists boycotting the proceedings, the pragmatist-reformist axis made significant gains, preventing the principlists from winning an outright majority of seats, although they did win a plurality. The left's strong showing was an early warning that the country's increasingly urban and secular population resented the efforts of Khamenei and the hardliners to enforce strict social controls and revolutionary steadfastness.

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The principlists grew increasingly antagonistic toward the pragmatists, who, along with the reformists, they accused of being “liberals” seeking to undermine the Islamic Revolution. According to [Afshon Ostovar](#), “Conservatives and hardliners charged “liberals” (or the modern-right and reformists) with leading a Western-backed conspiracy to destroy the revolution. Liberals, conservatives argued, were actively working to discredit Islam by openly questioning the validity of the guardianship and by promoting Western social mores and political practices such as democracy. Conservatives feared liberals were striving for a détente with the United States and were thus leading Iran back toward foreign control. These themes were summed up in the central conservative claim that liberals were at the head of a Western “cultural invasion,” undermining the revolution’s Islamic character. Warning against the “cultural invasion” of Western values became a rallying cry for anti-reform activism.”

The hardliners turned to vigilante violence to combat the rising scourge of “liberalism” with Khamenei’s blessing. Powerful bazaar leaders and hardline clerics backed the formation of a gang known as [ansar-e hezbollah](#), a group without official IRGC ties whose rank and file were drawn from socially conservative IRGC veterans and local *basij* units. *Ansar-e hezbollah* and other similar organizations acted as pressure groups, harassing and beating up liberal political opponents and engaging in attacks on student activists, newspapers, and other entities deemed as deviant, even setting fire to a Tehran cinema for showing a film considered “un-Islamic.” Khamenei’s tacit approval of *ansar-e hezbollah*’s extralegal violence showed the lengths he was willing to go to ensure principlist hegemony over Iran’s political and cultural spheres.

By the end of Rafsanjani’s presidency, Khamenei had settled into the Supreme Leader role and established himself as the more powerful member of the leadership diarchy. He had gained the loyalty of the clerical and IRGC elites, who relied on the Office of the Supreme Leader’s largesse for their own economic and political power. Still, Khamenei’s authority was not yet absolute. Rafsanjani remained a powerful figure in his own right, however, largely through his economic empire that he sat atop. Iran’s increasingly young and cosmopolitan population and its elected officials also served as a check on Khamenei, setting the stage for the main ideological battle that Iran continues to face until the present day. While Khamenei has sought to politicize the judiciary and security and intelligence services to rig the war in his favor, he never fully extinguished the movement of those who sought to reform the Islamic Republican system.

Khatami Presidency

The 1997 Presidential Elections

While the reform movement’s fortunes have risen and fallen over the past two decades, the May 1997 presidential election was a major show of strength and a wake-up call to the conservative hardliners that their rigidity and repression were deeply unpopular. In September 1996, one of Rafsanjani’s deputy presidents proposed that the constitution be amended to allow him to run for a third consecutive term. Khamenei was [loath to continue sharing power with Rafsanjani and vetoed the idea](#) before it could be put to a vote. Rafsanjani did not want to lose all his influence, so he used his presidency’s powers to prevent Khamenei from completely rigging the election. Under pressure from clerics on the Assembly of Experts, who sought to avoid a complete rupture between the Supreme Leader and the president, which

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would weaken the system of collective clerical rule, Khamenei agreed to grant Rafsanjani a soft landing by appointing him as head of the [Expediency Council](#), a body tasked with resolving disputes between the Guardian Council and legislature.

Still, Khamenei used the powers of his office to heavily place his thumb on the scales to ensure a victory for his preferred candidate. The conservative-dominated Guardian Council banned all but four of 230 applicants for the presidential election, with hardline *majles* speaker and Khamenei loyalist Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri easily the most prominent candidate permitted to stand for election. Former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Khatami, a moderate cleric who, despite calling for greater democracy and political and social reforms, was a disciple of Khomeini committed to the Islamic Revolution, was one of the other candidates allowed to run. After his compelled resignation from Rafsanjani's cabinet, Khatami was moved to the obscure post of director of Iran's National Library. With his low public profile, Khamenei and the Guardian Council assumed Khatami posed no threat to Nateq Nuri's inevitable victory.

Nuri had Khamenei's implicit backing, although not his outright endorsement. In a speech several weeks before the election, [Khamenei implored the electorate](#), "In issues such as the presidential election, trust the clergy more than anyone else." Because the clergy was overwhelmingly behind Nuri, Khamenei's implication was clear, but he did not want to explicitly endorse a candidate so he could give the appearance of neutrality. Additionally, if a candidate with his endorsement did lose, it would deal a blow to the aura of authority he sought to project.

Nuri also received backing from senior judges, armed vigilante groups such as *ansar-e Hezbollah*, and numerous other influential organizations and individuals. IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei went so far as to issue [written orders](#) for the IRGC rank-and-file to vote for Nateq Nuri. Khamenei only allowed 12 days of electoral campaigning, hamstringing the ability of any other candidates to gain traction. During the campaign, Nuri received the lion's share of TV and radio time and coverage. Polling then showed that Iranians strongly expected Nateq Nuri to coast to victory. According to Rafsanjani's diaries, Khatami nearly dropped out of the race multiple times over his frustrations with the interventions and clear favoritisms of the Supreme Leader, intelligence services, basij, vigilante groups, Friday prayer leaders, and state media. However, Rafsanjani encouraged him to remain in the race and personally interceded with Khamenei to assure Khatami of his neutrality and a more level playing field. Ultimately, Khamenei reasoned that the appearance of a competitive election would serve the Islamic Republic more than a rigged contest in which the main opposition refused to participate.

Rafsanjani and his pragmatist constituency feared the principlists sweeping to absolute power, so they coalesced behind Khatami's moderate reformist candidacy. The other two candidates fell by the wayside quickly, and a two-man race developed, with Khatami still seen as a long-shot candidate. Rafsanjani's political arm, the Executives of Construction, loaned its organizational powers to propping up Khatami's campaign. Khatami was able to assemble a [coalition of strange bedfellows](#) consisting of the former radicals and leftists who had rebranded as reformists committed to political and social liberalization, business leaders and other pragmatists in favor of economic liberalization, and women, young voters, the new middle class, ethnic and religious minorities, and intellectuals. While the leftists and neoliberal

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pragmatists had strong differences on the economy, these fissures were smoothed over in favor of the overarching goal of blocking the principlists.

Khatami campaigned tirelessly, evincing a populist touch and personal charm that endeared him to much of the electorate. In the campaign's only televised debate, Khatami intellectually outclassed Nuri. The Iranian electorate, frustrated with years of repression and privation since the revolution, was hungry for change and rallied behind Khatami's candidacy en masse. Khatami's popular support was not just a protest against the failures of the hardline conservatives but also was borne of [a positive belief](#) that Khatami, who spoke of restoring the rule of law, increased respect for democracy and human rights and a more permissive social environment, could materially improve their lives and deliver a freer society. In his stump speeches and appearances, Khatami emphasized that as president, he would seek to foster the development of an Iranian civil society, ensuring that Iran's Islamic government would be committed to republicanism and the inclusion of all citizens in political decision-making. Political elites in the U.S. and Europe were intrigued by Khatami's candidacy and hopeful that a victory would portend Iran moving in a more open, conciliatory direction.

Khatami's message resonated strongly within Iran, and in a shocking rebuke to Khamenei and his conservative backers, Khatami won a landslide victory with 69 percent of the vote on May 23, 1997. Turnout in the election was the highest ever, nearly 80 percent, showing the electorate's enthusiasm for Khatami's reformist agenda. Nearly 70 percent of the Iranian population was under 25 in 1997, and this cohort's overwhelming support for Khatami indicated that the rising generation lacked emotional and ideological affinities to the Islamic Revolution and its Khomeinist ethos. Overall, Khatami's election had seemingly ushered in a sea change, and Iranians were optimistic that reforms and greater liberties were on the horizon.

Khamenei and his conservative backers had other plans but had to move cautiously due to Khatami's clear popular mandate. Ahead of his August 1997 inauguration, Khatami's associates [reported to Rafsanjani](#) that, based on their meetings with Khamenei, they feared the Supreme Leader would do anything to impede Khatami from enacting reforms. Khamenei and his clerical backers fretted behind the scenes that the electorate had challenged his religious and political authority by supporting Khatami, potentially undermining the institution of the Supreme Leadership.

Khatami's landslide victory triggered soul-searching among Khamenei and the hardline principlists. The election showed that reformism appealed heavily to the Iranian population. Even the IRGC rank-and-file, which had been a reliably conservative constituency and had been ordered by their commander to support Nuri, [reportedly](#) voted in unexpectedly large numbers for Khatami. While chastened by the electorate's rejection of his hardline worldview, Khamenei and his supporters did not conclude that they should support reforming the system to win back the population's affection. Instead, they concluded that they had failed to crack down on the spread of "liberalism" hard enough and needed to redouble their commitment to the principles of the Islamic Revolution to ensure their victory in the intensifying ideological contest for the country's soul.

One of Khamenei's first moves after Khatami's election was to sack the IRGC's commander, Mohsen Rezaei, who he decided had been [too cautious in combating the scourge of liberalism](#) at home and

spreading the Islamic Revolution abroad. Khamenei replaced Rezaei with his more hardline deputy, Yahya Rahim Safavi, and elevated a new cadre of similarly ideologically inclined staff commanders throughout the IRGC, girding for the organization to take on a role of confrontation with the elected government of Mohammad Khatami.

While putting the preparations in place to undermine Khatami's reformist agenda, at the outset, Khamenei gave the new president leeway to introduce various new freedoms and chip away at the regime's red lines. Khatami recognized that Khamenei had more power as Supreme Leader, and that hardliners still controlled the country's most important levers of power: the IRGC, clergy, judiciary, *majles*, and intelligence and security services. Still, he had a trump card, the backing of the population. A push and pull dynamic soon emerged, whereby every effort by Khatami to establish greater freedoms would trigger reactionary reprisals.

Khatami's Reformist Successes



(L-R) President Mohammad Khatami and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#)

In the early going, Khatami had a string of successes that indicated Iran was moving toward becoming a more open society. His culture and interior ministers issued licenses that allowed for the flourishing of a freer press. Dozens of new magazines and newspapers affiliated with the reformist movement opened that pushed the boundaries of acceptable discourse, publishing exposes of corruption among political and IRGC elites and offering biting satire that skewered numerous sacred cows. According to Nikki Keddie, the [reformist press](#) "became the center for extensive

debates about civil society, tolerance, the rule of law, the position of women, and possible different interpretations of, or approaches to *velayat-e faqih*. Without political parties, the press became the center of political debate." Additionally, professional and civic associations proliferated, and Khatami enacted a promise to hold elections for local councils, which were guaranteed by the constitution but had never before taken place. This helped diffuse power and give the populace a say in their municipal governance, a move resented by the [majles](#), which sought to retain centralized power.

These developments frustrated Khamenei and the hardliners, who waited for any opportunity to go on the counteroffensive. In November 1997, one such opportunity emerged when Ayatollah Montazeri, the former heir apparent to the Supreme Leadership, issued the most scathing public rebuke of Khamenei's leadership. In his [address](#), Montazeri advocated for the Islamic Republic to emphasize its republicanism and for Khatami to be assertive in implementing his agenda. He said, "*velayat-e faqih* is in our constitution but this does not mean that the faqih is the absolute ruler, because then the republic becomes meaningless. ... If I were you (Khatami) I would go to the Leader and tell him 'your station is safe and people have respect for you, but 22 million voted for me and, when they were voting, these 22 million knew that the Leader of the country supported someone else.'" He criticized the flimsy basis for

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Khamenei's elevation to the rank of the ayatollah and called into question his religious authority, preying upon Khamenei's deepest insecurities.

Montazeri's insubordination led to Khamenei's vigilante backers destroying his congregational prayer hall and leading days of protests and marches against him. He was subsequently placed under house arrest and stripped of his title of ayatollah in the state-run media, becoming a cause celebre among reformists who still revered him. Khamenei [approved his freedom](#) five years later only when Montazeri's health deteriorated, seeking to preempt unrest if Montazeri died under state custody. The incident underscored Khamenei's vulnerability regarding his religious legitimacy and hair-trigger willingness to resort to repression when challenged.

Despite the crackdown against Montazeri, a general sense of optimism reigned due to the freer press atmosphere and Khatami's successful efforts to decrease instances of the morality police harassing citizens deemed violating Iran's Islamic mores. In addition to the more relaxed social environment, Iranians were buoyed by Khatami's efforts in the foreign policy realm to resume Rafsanjani's thwarted mission of openness and rapprochement with the West. Iran's status as a pariah state due to its domestic human rights abuses, aggression during the Iran-Iraq War, and support for international terrorism had harmed the country's economic prospects and left it isolated. The increasingly young and urban population hungered for upward mobility and the normalization of Iran's status among the international community.

Although he was subordinate to Supreme Leader Khamenei, in the eyes of the international press and political elites, Khatami was the most prominent figure in the country, and if he could be empowered, his reformist agenda could take root. Iran could become a responsible actor on the world stage. In 1998, Khatami introduced his seminal initiative, the "[Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures](#)." Framed as an antidote to Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, which posited that ideological and cultural fault lines between civilizations, especially between the Muslim world and the West, would be the major source of the ongoing conflict in the post-Soviet unipolar era, Khatami theorized that if the West operated from a basis of mutual respect rather than domination, a peaceful and stable multipolar order could emerge. According to Khatami, dialogue and cultural exchanges could foster understanding and respect between civilizations with different cultures and traditions. The absence of such dialogue, he argued, was what led to mistrust, enmity, and denigration of the other.

World leaders feted Khatami, and the United Nations General Assembly even passed a resolution in November 1998 declaring 2001 the [U.N. Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations](#). Still, Khatami had a domestic audience of one he needed to appease – Supreme Leader Khamenei – who remained as resistant as ever to greater openness and hostile to Western cultural infiltration. In prominent media appearances, including a [1998 CNN interview with Christiane Amanpour](#), Khatami sought to appease Khamenei by clarifying that he opposed full, warm relations with the U.S., which would lead Iran toward dependence on the U.S. His program only went so far as calling for cultural exchanges and dialogue with American intellectuals, athletes, and other thought leaders to reduce tensions between the two countries. Despite his reformist bona fides, Khatami echoed more hardline Iranian leaders when he spoke with Amanpour and in his 1998 [address to the U.N. General Assembly](#), blaming the U.S. for the enmity with Iran due to the perpetuation of its "Cold War mentality," which led it to seek to dominate

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the Islamic world in pursuit of global, unipolar hegemony. While the substance of Khatami's ideology was similar to the hardliners, he spoke in flowery prose. He refrained from firebrand rhetoric and denunciations of the "Great Satan," prompting the [international media to praise his moderation](#).

Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilizations" initiative bore some early fruit. Iran and the U.S. arranged a series of wrestling matches, first in Tehran and then in Stillwater, Oklahoma, to break the ice. Khatami's foreign minister inaugurated warmer ties with Saudi Arabia, and Khatami [publicly distanced Iran from Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa](#) against Salman Rushdie in 1998 with Khamenei's acquiescence, paving the way for the restoration of diplomatic ties with the U.K. and furthering Iran's détente with the rest of Europe. Khatami even became the first post-revolutionary Iranian president to visit European capitals, embarking [on trips to Rome, the Vatican, and Paris](#) in 1999.

Ultimately, Khatami would pay the price for his efforts to soften Iran's image abroad. The hardliners' resentments grew over what they saw as Khatami's violations of Iran's revolutionary principles and their waning popularity. Khamenei led the charge, as he was unwilling to cede control over Iran's policy agenda to a president who was overstepping the bounds of his position. Khamenei viewed the embrace of Khatami by Iran's enemies in the U.S., Israel, and Europe with suspicion, seeing a plot to exploit Iran's internal factional divisions to create a situation of "[dual sovereignty](#)," wherein Iran's elected government would become an independent power center unto itself. Khamenei believed Iran's enemies wanted to marginalize the *velayat-e faqih* position within Iran, turning it into a figurehead role akin to the British monarchy and neutering the Islamic Revolution. One of Iran's chief reformist strategists, who served as an advisor to Khatami, had spoken publicly about Khatami's landslide election as empowering the elected government and, by extension, the Iranian people, invoking the notion of dual sovereignty as an analytical framework. In March 2000, loyalist Khamenei vigilantes attempted to assassinate this strategist, rendering him paralyzed.

This attack was emblematic of a broader campaign by hardliners to frustrate Khatami's reformist agenda. The IRGC, basij, vigilante groups, and the intelligence and security services utilized repression and intimidation against reformists in the political, cultural, and academic spheres, while hardliners in the *majles*, judiciary, and Guardian Council abused their governmental powers to hamstring progress and went after Khatami's allies. Supreme Leader Khamenei and his clerical loyalists lent their critical backing to the campaign, ensuring the hardline camp's eventual victory. For his part, Khatami proved too weak a leader to challenge Khamenei forcefully despite having the backing of most of the population. At his core, Khatami believed in Iran's revolutionary system and sought to improve it to ensure its longevity rather than opposing it outright. This fact and intimidation from the IRGC ultimately ensured Khatami's continued deference to Khamenei.

The hardliners' counteroffensive against Khatami's reformation project began in earnest a year into Khatami's presidency. The existential nature of the fight led to many in the conservative wing becoming ever more doctrinaire, pugilistic, and willing to act outside the law to retain power. This new breed of conservatives branded themselves "[fundamentalists](#)" and referred to interchangeably as [neoconservatives](#). The first major salvo in their war, aside from the house arrest of Ayatollah Montazeri, came in April 1998 when the judiciary convicted Tehran's popular reformist mayor, Gholam-Hossein

Karbaschi, on trumped-up, politicized charges of corruption and abuse of power. The police and vigilante gangs subsequently attacked student-led demonstrations against Karbaschi's imprisonment.

The conservatives soon realized that the growing independent media represented a threat, as it gave the reformists powerful mouthpieces to promote their agenda and expose the corruption and brutality of the hardliners. In April 1998, the IRGC commander told a gathering of his men in Qom that the permissive press environment was endangering national security, [warning](#), "I am after uprooting anti-revolutionaries everywhere. We must behead some and cut out the tongues of others." Several months later, in July 1998, the hardline Khamenei loyalist head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, [declared](#) that the flourishing reformist media was abusing freedom of the press, a sentiment endorsed by Khamenei. Khamenei gave a series of [speeches](#) during this period in which he stressed that the Islamic Revolution allowed for freedom of expression and the press but cautioned against any journalism which would cause Iranians to lose faith in Islam or the revolution. The judiciary began a wave of newspaper closures, and the *majles* passed a law allowing journalists who criticized Islamic or revolutionary principles to be charged with threatening national security. Many editors and journalists were arrested and tried in special courts set up for press cases. The IRGC, *basij*, and vigilante gangs frequently raided the offices of reformist newspapers with impunity.

Despite the hardline campaign to rein in the reformist media, reformists persisted, reopening newspapers under different names after closures. In this period of journalists pushing the boundaries of press freedom, dogged investigative reporting by journalists Akbar Ganji and Emad Baghi [uncovered a massive scandal](#) tying former President Rafsanjani and senior officials in Iran's intelligence services to a string of murders of writers, intellectuals, and dissidents critical of the *velayat-e faqih* regime or calling for ethnic separatism during the preceding decade. More than 80 dissident figures died under suspicious circumstances between 1988 and 1998. However, their deaths were spread out under various circumstances, obscuring the fact that they were linked.

The Chain Murders

Finally, in late 1998, a series of connected assassinations known as the "[chain murders](#)" took place quickly, exposing the intelligence ministry's role in the decade-long serial killings. On September 15, 1998, Supreme Leader Khamenei called on the judiciary to rein in press outlets that abused freedom of the press. The following day, a special press court ordered the closure of a popular reformist daily newspaper and the arrest of its employees as "enemies of God." A group of journalists concerned with the escalating hostility to the press moved to form a writers' association. However, the leaders of the effort were summoned to the Tehran public prosecutor for interrogation in October 1998 and ordered to cease their activism. Over the next two months, five writers tied to the creation of the association were violently murdered.

President Khatami formed a committee to investigate the murders. Shortly thereafter, the committee blamed Saeed Emami, the deputy intelligence minister, when most of the killings occurred. Emami still served as an advisor to the hardline intelligence minister, Ghorban-Ali Dorri Najafabadi, who had been appointed at Khamenei's insistence over Khatami's objections during the "chain murders." The committee alleged that Emami led a team of rogue intelligence agents who carried out the "chain murders" and most, if not all, of the roughly 80 suspicious deaths during the prior decade. According to

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the military prosecutor who tried his case, Emami had carried out several of the murders himself, including that of Ahmad Khomeini. Khomeini, who had engineered Khamenei's rise along with Rafsanjani, ultimately became critical of the hardliners' efforts to dominate Iranian politics and gave a speech denouncing them in early 1995. A month later, he died of an apparent heart attack. His death was alleged to have been caused by cyanide poisoning by Emami, who saw Khomeini as a liability to the Islamic Republic.

The exposure of the "chain murders" shocked and outraged the Iranian public, placing Khamenei and the hardliners on their heels. Khamenei denounced the attacks as "[criminal, ugly, and hateful](#)" and [insisted](#) that Iran's enemies, particularly Israel, had a hand in the plot, working with corrupt actors in the intelligence ministry to paint the regime negatively. The intelligence ministry sought to walk a tightrope and put out an unprecedented statement in January 1999, acknowledging for the first time its participation in crimes but pinning the blame solely on Emami and his rogue agents. The ministry's [statement](#) read, "The despicable and abhorrent recent murders in Tehran are a sign of a chronic conspiracy and a threat to the national security. Based on its legal obligations and following clear directives issued by the Supreme Leader and the president, the Intelligence Ministry set as a priority discovering and uprooting this sinister and threatening event. With the cooperation of the specially-appointed investigatory committee of the president, the ministry has succeeded in identifying the group responsible for the killings, has made arrests, and referred their cases to the judiciary. Unfortunately, a small number of irresponsible, misguided, headstrong and obstinate staff within the Ministry of Intelligence, who are no doubt under the influence of rogue undercover agents and acting towards the objectives of foreign and estranged sources when committing these criminal acts."

The statement sought to shield the ministry's senior officials from accountability by denying any knowledge of the murders, but even this effort at spin represented an admission of counterintelligence failure. Khatami demanded that Intelligence Minister Najafabadi resign or be fired, and in February 1999, Khatami replaced him with a reformist, temporarily wresting control back from hardliners of a key institution. The black eye suffered by the exposure of the targeted assassination campaign led Iran's intelligence ministry to draw back from pursuing such prominent operations, but its general repression, harassment, and intimidation of dissent continued unabated.

In their investigative reporting, Akbar Ganji and Emad Baghi alleged that many prominent figures in the regime, in fact, had knowledge of and backed the "chain murders," [including former President Rafsanjani and his intelligence minister, Ali Fallahian](#). [Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei](#), who would later serve as intelligence minister during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first presidential term and is currently the head of Iran's judiciary, was also involved, according to Ganji. There was a great deal of speculation that the effort to pin the blame solely on Emami and rogue elements was a cover-up of higher officials' knowledge or direct involvement. This view was reinforced when Emami died suspiciously in prison, allegedly of suicide by ingesting hair-removal cream.

Amid the furor over the "chain murders," the Islamic Republic held its first municipal council elections in February 1999. The reformists [dominated around the country](#), indicating anger at the hardliners for their obstructionism and continued enthusiasm for Khatami's reformism, even though his efforts at

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liberalization were backsliding. While it seemed the reformists were reaching a high-water mark, their project would soon unravel.

The regime went on to target the journalists who played a part in exposing the systematic campaign of assassinations. The judiciary gave Emad Baghi a three-year prison sentence for “propaganda against the Islamic Republic” and “divulging state secret information” and sentenced Akbar Ganji to six years in Evin prison. He [alleged](#) during his trial that during his pre-trial detention, he had suffered torture and abuse by guards, was placed in solitary confinement for three months, and was denied visitation by his family and lawyers.

Iranian authorities also banned three reformist newspapers – Salam, Khordad, and Sobh-e Emrooz – for their damning reporting on the decade-long string of regime-linked murders. In early July 1999, the *majles* approved a bill sharply limiting press freedom, and the subsequent closure of Salam on July 7, 1999, would trigger an unprecedented protest movement that began at Tehran University and soon spread around the country. On July 8, student groups at Tehran University held peaceful demonstrations against the new press law, the closure of Salam, and to air general dissatisfaction at the slow pace of reforms under Khatami. Shortly after midnight, around [400 baton-wielding anti-riot police and plainclothes intelligence ministry operatives](#), most likely with [ansar-e hezbollah vigilantes](#) in the mix as well, stormed a student housing complex of Tehran University and began wantonly attacking students and destroying property. At least five students were killed, some reportedly thrown off balconies, and 200 were arrested.

The 1999 Student Protest Movement

Khamenei [criticized the assailants](#) for their excesses and called for justice to be served, but his words rang hollow as he had fanned the flames of press hostility and vigilantism since the reformists began their ascent. News of the dorm room attack catalyzed five days of student-led anti-conservative, anti-Khamenei protests, spreading to 18 Iranian cities. By daring to openly criticize Khamenei and provocative chants of “[Khamenei must go!](#)”, the protestors were touching the third rail of Iranian politics, challenging the legitimacy of the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, the regime, and the Islamic Revolution itself.

Each reformist demonstration was met with counter-demonstrations by student *basijis*, *ansar-e hezbollahis*, and other pro-hardline forces, and both sides became increasingly radicalized as tensions flared, with the conservatives accusing the reformists of undermining Islam and the *velayat-e faqih* regime. The IRGC viewed the situation as a threat to the foundations of the Islamic Republic and leaned on President Khatami to rein in the demonstrators, using thinly veiled threats against not just the protestors but Khatami himself. In a letter signed by 24 IRGC and *basij* commanders several days into the protests, they cautioned Khatami that they would be forced to act if he would not, [saying](#), “How long should we observe the situation with tears in our eyes? How long should we suffer in silence and practice democracy through creating chaos and insulting each other? How long should we practice revolutionary patience while the system is being destroyed? Mr. President: If you do not make a revolutionary decision and if you do not fulfill your Islamic and national mission today, tomorrow will be far too late. It is unimaginable how irretrievable the situation will become. In the end, we would like to

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express our utmost respect for your Excellency and to declare that our patience has run out. We cannot tolerate this situation any longer if it is not dealt with.”

The IRGC commanders’ letter was notable for showcasing their disdain for democracy and the republican elements of the Islamic Republic. This was the first major intervention into domestic politics by the IRGC, which had grown increasingly rich and powerful as an institution outside of the limelight. In effect, they were putting Khatami on notice that if he did not move to restore order, it would imperil not only his political fortunes but also the institution of the presidency itself.

Khatami, who was at his core loyal to the principles of the Islamic Revolution, heeded the IRGC’s warning and, whether out of duress or genuine conviction, denounced the protestors’ anti-regime slogans as [“demagogic, provocative, and a danger for the national security.”](#) Khatami’s denunciation of the student uprising tainted him as a regime apparatchik in many reformists’ eyes. It served as a wake-up call to the more idealistic-minded that politicians dependent on good standing with Khamenei and the regime could not be trusted as vessels for overhauling Iran’s revolutionary system, which was the genesis of the nation’s ills.

Despite Khatami’s call for restraint and a government ban on further protests, the protestors returned to the street, where they were violently confronted by [law enforcement, the intelligence ministry, anti-riot special units, and thousands of *ansar-e hezbollah* vigilantes](#). The regime also mobilized tens of thousands of supporters – many who were reportedly government workers given the day off and bussed to Tehran – for a countervailing demonstration and show of force. The counter-protestors took back the streets, and many pro-reformist demonstrators who showed up were beaten and/or detained. Although pacified, the 1999 student demonstrations marked the beginning of a sustained protest movement against the regime, which has cropped up repeatedly over the years in response to its worst excesses.

The tumult, which was unlike anything Iran had experienced since the revolution, shook both Khamenei and Khatami’s confidence in their positions. For a period, the two improved their working relationship. Khamenei demonstrated his penchant for pragmatism when it served him or when he was pressured and gave amnesty to most arrested protestors. The regime tried and sentenced many of the perpetrators of the dorm room attack that precipitated the protests to demonstrate that the rule of law still applied. Khamenei replaced the hardline head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Yazdi, with a more pragmatic conservative. These measures were part of a push-and-pull dynamic wherein Khamenei would allow some liberalizing reforms to be enacted. However, then his hardline allies in and out of government would act to undermine Khatami’s agenda.

The 2000 Parliamentary Elections

After the pacification of the student demonstrations, the reformist political establishment urged a renewed focus on political elections rather than street-level activism. Although the seeds of alienation had been planted among their base, the reformists, running under the banner of the 2nd Khordad movement – a reference to the date of Khatami’s improbable 1997 victory – gained outright control of the *majles* in the February 2000 elections. Marring their victory, however, was the arrest and heavily politicized trial in the Special Court for Clerics of Khatami’s Interior Minister, Abdullah Nuri, a popular

politician running for *majles* and was a probable contender for the Speaker position. In his stead, Mehdi Karroubi was re-appointed Speaker when the parliament was seated in May 2000.

The hardliners responded to the defeat by continuing to stymie the reformists, closing more reformist press outlets, and arresting more journalists. The reformist *majles* passed a raft of progressive legislation, including bills to improve women's rights, but the Guardian Council repeatedly exercised its veto power over these laws. Rafsanjani had [tilted more toward his natural conservative ideology since leaving the presidency](#), as he was wary of the reformists gaining too much power and implementing reforms that went too far in his eyes. In his role as head of the [Expediency Council](#), he resoundingly sided with the [Guardian Council](#) against the *majles*, ensuring that reformist policymaking could not overcome institutional gridlock.

Reformists in the *majles* also introduced a proposal in August 2000 calling for reversing many of the judiciary's closures of reformist press outlets and freeing jailed journalists. Speaker Mehdi Karroubi was forced to withdraw the bill from consideration, however, after Khamenei issued a [direct decree](#) cautioning against "the enemies of Islam, the revolution and the Islamic system taking the press in their hands." Khamenei's intervention was one of the first instances of him usurping the lawmaking powers of the *majles*, in effect legislating from on high. While more moderate in outlook, Karroubi was himself a cleric in favor of retaining and strengthening the Iranian system of clerical oversight. So he acquiesced readily to Khamenei's expansion of power. While this forestalled an immediate crisis, it would pave the way for Khamenei to continually gain power at the expense of republican institutions.

With the liberalizing press bill shelved, the judiciary, which was accountable only to Khamenei and had its own police and intelligence services, conducted additional newspaper closures and carried out a spate of arrests targeting reformist journalists, intellectuals, students, and political and human rights leaders. Violent vigilante attacks against these constituencies escalated as well. Spooked by the student protest ordeal, Khatami urged the reformists to refrain from responding too provocatively and avoiding further demonstrations. Despite his restraint, he was unsuccessful in extracting concessions, causing his supporters, especially the youth, to grow increasingly disillusioned with reformism and politics in general.

According to Iranian-American scholar Said Arjomand, it became clear that Khamenei had outmaneuvered Khatami and ensured the death spiral of reformism despite its electoral successes. Arjomand [writes](#) that Khatami's destruction "came in the spring and summer of 2000, at the very time of the astonishing defeat of the pro-clerical candidates in the national elections of the Sixth Majles, with the Leader's several deadly strikes: the almost successful assassination of the president's most important reformist aide, the clampdown on the pro-president reformist press, and, above all, his "governmental order" to the newly elected reformist Majles to stop its debate on the press law in August 2000. Khamenei embraced the president after each strike, and with each embrace came his affirmation that Khatami is one of us. Khatami did not have the courage to push him away and say he was not one of them. From then on, Khamenei knew he could do anything he wanted with the smiling Sayyed."



(L-R) Rafsanjani, Khamenei, and Khatami at Second Inauguration of President Khatami. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Despite failing to deliver substantive, enduring reforms, Khatami had at least created an enthusiasm and optimism for change that permeated society. He was personally frustrated by the systemic obstacles preventing him from enacting change but [reluctantly decided to pursue a second term](#). The hardliners were skilled at using the levers to block Khatami from advancing his policies, but they had not yet mastered political organizing. In the June 2001 presidential election, Khatami was the sole moderate candidate in a field of 10 allowed to run by the Guardian Council. The conservatives were generally unpopular and additionally failed to coalesce behind any single candidate.

As a result, Khatami increased his share of the vote from 69 percent to 77 percent. Turnout dipped from its highwater mark of nearly 80 percent in 1997 to 66 percent, indicating the early onset of voter alienation, but the country was still overwhelmingly behind Khatami and against the conservatives. However, due to Khamenei's obstructionism, disillusionment would quickly grow, marking the death knell of the reformist era.

Khatami's Second Term

Khatami began his second term acknowledging the setbacks to reformism in his inaugural address and tried to boldly make institutional changes that would strengthen his ability as president to enact his agenda. In October 2001, Khatami called on the judiciary to rein in its intrusions on press freedom and its campaign of arrests targeting reformists, especially parliamentarians who were supposed to have constitutional immunity. His pleas fell on deaf ears, and the judiciary summoned more than 60 reformist *majles* members to court in the following months, convicting four.

After biding his time for nearly a year, Khatami gave an address in August 2002 in which he reaffirmed that he was committed to establishing an "Islamic Democracy" in Iran that would uphold the rights of its citizens. Days after this speech, the *majles* would introduce "twin bills" that sought to reconcile the contradictions in the Iranian constitution between theocratic rule by the *velayat-e faqih* and republican rule by popular will. These ["twin bills"](#) were the last ditch effort by Khatami to change the trajectory of the Islamic Republic away from authoritarianism and total domination by hardliners by ensuring that reformists would have a viable path to competing in the Iranian system and a robust seat at the table when it came to policymaking. The first bill sought to limit the Guardian Council's approval powers for candidates for office, while the second bill sought to clarify and strengthen the role of the presidency. This bill sought to enumerate the president's powers to enforce the constitution and to give the president recourse to prevent institutions under the sole oversight of [the Office of the Supreme Leader](#),

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such as the judiciary, intelligence and security services, and state-run media, from extralegal abuses of power.

The bills, which sought to limit the powers of the Guardian Council and Supreme Leader, would have to pass the Guardian Council, which was loath to cede its own powers. While futile, their introduction represented a symbolic stand by Khatami, demonstrating that he had exhausted all possible avenues of changing the system from within. The reformist-dominated *majles* passed the twin bills rapidly, but a two-year showdown then ensued as Khatami sought to negotiate a compromise with the unyielding Guardian Council. In May 2003, the reformists in the *majles* urged Khamenei to embrace republicanism to save the regime from itself, [writing in a letter to the Supreme Leader](#), “We are deeply worried that the continuation of the present policies carried out by unelected men is taking us to a point of no return. ... We must learn a lesson from the fate of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein and understand that despotism and selfishness is destined to take the country down to defeat.” Ultimately, Khatami [withdrew](#) the bills in April 2004 rather than allowing the Expediency Council to adjudicate, as their defeat was a fait accompli.

Khatami’s only leverage during this period was the threat that he would resign, which would have signaled that the reformists had lost faith in the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic regime. Khatami’s resignation would have likely catalyzed protests and again drawn the public into confrontation with the regime over losing its only semblance of representative government. Despite this looming prospect, the hardliners did not offer any concessions to Khatami to entice him to remain in his post.

During his second term, the IRGC’s leadership grew increasingly antagonistic toward Khatami and the reformists, especially after the *majles* introduced legislation to [ban the IRGC from participation in the Iranian economy](#). IRGC commander Safavi [warned](#) in November 2002 that his forces were ready to unleash violence against reformist leaders and protestors if Khatami were to resign and stoke demonstrations against the regime. The IRGC viewed the reformists’ efforts to rein in their growing influence as an existential threat, drew closer to Khamenei, and supported authoritarianism in response. The IRGC would soon begin intervening in Iranian politics more directly than ever on the side of the principlist camp. During Khatami’s second term, the judiciary also escalated its abuses, continuing with increasingly blatantly extralegal efforts to suppress the press and arrest prominent reformists who publicly backed the twin bills.

Despite Safavi’s warning, Iran’s reformist student population, which tended to be the most radicalized constituency opposing *velayat-e faqih*, engaged in continuous small-scale demonstrations during this period to pressure the regime to adopt the twin bills and to pressure Khatami and the reformists to be more assertive. Common chants at these protests included “[Death to Dictatorship](#)” and “[Khatami, resign!](#)” Whether due to pressure from the IRGC and other increasingly antagonistic hardliners or an overarching sense of duty to the Islamic Revolution and the regime, Khatami and the reformists in the *majles* disavowed the student-led protests.

Khatami’s disavowal confirmed that his ultimate loyalties were with the regime and not the public. Khatami and the reformist political establishment had succeeded in cobbling together a coalition of students, women, the cosmopolitan bourgeoisie, the urban poor, and ethnic minorities, but they failed

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at building organizational links to coordinate the aims and tactics of the political leadership with the base, the reformist media, and the burgeoning civil society. As a regime insider, Khatami feared a genuine popular movement would soon escape his control and challenge the entire system. As a result of this disconnect, Khatami declined to resign, and his only serious attempt to challenge Khamenei and the hardliners faltered.

Widespread disaffection, particularly among the students, set in. From Evin prison, journalist Akbar Ganji, who had gained increased prominence as a symbol of resistance, called reform-minded Iranians to engage in [civil disobedience and electoral boycotts](#). The public's disappointment in Khatami's failure to deliver reforms led the pendulum of Iranian electoral politics to swing decisively in favor of the hardliners. In February 2003, as the "twin bills" floundered, Iran held its second round of municipal elections. Heeding Ganji's call for boycotts, [turnout was only 48 percent around the country, and in Tehran, only 12 percent of eligible voters cast ballots](#). Candidates affiliated with the conservative coalition [won 64 percent of municipal council seats nationwide and, in a political earthquake, won every seat but one on Tehran's 15-seat city council](#).

Aside from large numbers of reformists boycotting the elections, there were several other factors underpinning the rise of the conservatives. First was the Guardian Council, which had grown increasingly resentful of Khatami for trying to curb its powers. The Council members [announced](#) they had been too lax in their vetting during the previous *majles* elections and would be far quicker to disqualify candidates they did not like going forward. After their defeat in the previous four election cycles, hardline activists had begun devoting resources to making inroads with voters. A younger generation of non-clerical activists, typically from the far-right neoconservative side of the spectrum, under 50, and veterans of the Iran-Iraq War, grew frustrated with the older guard represented by Khamenei's generation. These grassroots activists had taken over mid-level positions in various governmental sectors but were largely marginalized during the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations. In 2003, they formed an umbrella group of political parties and organizations called the [Alliance of Builders of Revolutionary Iran, or Abadgaran](#), to unify and organize the Iranian right. In Tehran, the Abadgaran-dominated council selected one of the organization's founders, a firebrand who had served as its chief strategist and campaign manager, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to serve as mayor.

The Abadgaran proved adept at drawing out the vote from the IRGC, basijis, and their families. They were also able to win over the urban poor and working classes to their side, which had been a key constituency for Khatami. The reformists had come to be seen as an elitist movement of the middle and upper classes and intelligentsia. The working class tended to be more traditional and religiously conservative in their social outlook, but they still initially bought into the reformists' economic promises of development and higher living standards. However, once in power, Khatami largely hewed to Rafsanjani's neoliberal economic program, reducing subsidies and increasing privatization, which caused inequality to increase. Although the reformists were generally of the left, they were not a pro-worker, labor party. The Iranian labor movement [grew increasingly militant and prone to strikes](#) during Khatami's terms in office over increased privatization, lack of protections for workers, stagnant wages, and efforts by businesses to shift to contract workers. The neoconservatives portrayed themselves as of

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the working class and adopted populist rhetoric in their campaigning, embracing the theme of social justice as inherently promised by the Islamic Revolution's principles.

The Post-9/11 Era

International affairs, specifically as they related to the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the launching of a U.S.-led "Global War on Terrorism," was an additional factor undergirding the rise of the Iranian neoconservatives. The 9/11 attacks led to a brief pause in the enmity that had typically characterized the U.S.-Iranian relationship. President Khatami was among the first world leaders to [condemn](#) the attack, and Iranians held candlelight vigils and moments of silence at sporting events to honor the victims. On the Friday after the attacks, Supreme Leader Khamenei [denounced](#) the killing of civilians in a sermon broadcast to his followers in Iran and beyond. "Mass killings of human beings are catastrophic acts which are condemned wherever they may happen and whoever the perpetrators and the victims may be," said [Khamenei](#).

Afghanistan, under the Sunni extremist Taliban, backed by [Saudi Arabia](#) and Pakistan, had emerged as the major proximate geopolitical threat to Iran after the Iran-Iraq War, and the first Gulf War had largely neutralized Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The two countries nearly declared war in 1998 after the Taliban massacred Shi'a Hazaras and attacked an Iranian consulate while conquering Mazar-i-Sharif. Before the 9/11 attacks, Iran and the U.S. independently backed the Northern Alliance in their struggle against the Taliban. Immediately following the 9/11 attack, Khamenei called on the U.S. not to invade Afghanistan unilaterally, [warning](#) that establishing a U.S. military footprint in Pakistan and Afghanistan would multiply its regional problems. While Khamenei was happy to eliminate the Taliban, he assessed that a long-term U.S. presence in its backyard would be a greater headache for Iran. Still, Iran's leadership [backed](#) a multi-lateral approach, preferably under U.N. auspices, to confronting the Taliban and even offered to participate in such a coalition.

Once the U.S. decided to lead its invasion, Khamenei opted to take advantage of the opportunity. Khamenei empowered [IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani](#), who would soon become Khamenei's primary agent for confronting the U.S. and Israel and expanding Iranian influence around the region, to conduct several rounds of [covert shuttle diplomacy](#) with U.S. diplomats. Iran went so far as to share intelligence with its U.S. counterparts during this time, hastening the fall of the Taliban government. Iran then played a productive role in the negotiations to stabilize Afghanistan, giving critical backing to the U.S. efforts to install Hamid Karzai. Iran's efforts were not merely philanthropic; once the U.S. decided to invade, Khamenei and Soleimani oriented their efforts to ensure that [Afghanistan](#) would remain weak but stable, funneling arms to insurgents of various stripes so that it could build influence with all players (including the Taliban) and attack the U.S. military by proxy.

One of the Iranian interlocutors in the secret U.S.-Iranian negotiations revealed to the head of the U.S. delegation that Soleimani, [pleased](#) with the cooperation, had been considering, at great political risk as he was not yet the revered figure he would later become, a reevaluation of Iran's ties with the U.S. More conservative figures within Iran, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, were cautiously on board with the idea of partnering with the U.S. toward the limited tactical end of confronting the Taliban but remained skeptical of U.S. motives. However, it is unclear to this day how accurate the Iranian interlocutor's description of Tehran's readiness to work with Washington was. In January 2002, the U.S.

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signaled its skepticism of Iran when President George W. Bush labeled Iran part of an “axis of evil” in his State of the Union address. With characteristic bluster, Khamenei responded that U.S. foreign policy was the world’s “greatest evil” and that denunciation by “the most cursed of the world’s satans” was effectively a badge of honor.

The subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 confirmed Khamenei’s perception of the U.S. as bent on Iranian regime change like never before. The U.S. was no longer the distant “Great Satan” but a proximate threat with an expanding military footprint in the region that had toppled two neighboring governments. The initial success of its invasion of Iraq caused Khamenei great alarm, especially given that the U.S. justified its invasion on the need to preempt Iraq from obtaining weapons of mass destruction. In August 2002, the National Council for Resistance in Iran (NCRI), the diplomatic arm of the MEK, had exposed that Iran was building undisclosed uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing facilities at Natanz and Arak in violation of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. While Khatami and Khamenei insisted that Iran would never seek a nuclear weapon and that Iran’s right to peaceful nuclear energy was sacrosanct, they became desperate for a resolution to the nuclear impasse lest the U.S. turned its sights on Iran next.

In May 2003, Khamenei secretly approved a proposal by Khatami to offer the U.S. negotiations on a “[grand bargain](#)” that would resolve all outstanding issues between the two countries, including its nuclear program and support for terrorist groups such as [Hezbollah](#) and [Hamas](#). Iran sent its offer to the U.S. through a back channel, using the Swiss ambassador to Iran to convey Iran’s willingness to negotiate. U.S. officials rejected and later downplayed the significance of the Iranian proposal.

The Iranian system was left with a difficult choice: Yielding on its nuclear program would be seized upon as a betrayal of Iran’s sovereignty by its domestic enemies while pressing ahead defiantly would bring isolation from Europe and potential confrontation with the U.S. After the failure of the “grand bargain” offer and in the face of mounting international pressure over its nuclear program, Khatami entered into negotiations with the IAEA and E3 (the UK, France, and Germany). Iran agreed during the negotiations to suspend its enrichment activities, allow snap IAEA inspections, and adopt an additional protocol to the NPT that would restrict its nuclear program. While Khatami could not have made these concessions without Khamenei’s blessing, Khamenei was happy to allow Khatami to absorb the [opprobrium](#) of hardline clerics and IRGC officials, who accused Khatami of selling out Iran, undermining its deterrence, and advancing U.S. interests.

The February 2004 *majles* election demonstrated that the marginalization of the reformists that first became apparent during the prior year’s municipal elections was now complete. The Guardian Council nearly touched off a crisis the month before the election, disqualifying almost 2,500 reformist candidates in its most nakedly political show of power yet, but the reformists were feckless and divided over how to respond. The reformists went from dominating the *majles* to controlling just 16 percent of seats, while the conservative coalition won 67 percent. A neoconservative from the Abadgaran faction was appointed Speaker, reflecting the far-right’s rise to dominance within the conservative coalition.

By the end of the Khatami administration, Supreme Leader Khamenei had succeeded in quelling the reformist current, using the structural advantages of his position to not cede ground to the presidency.

Ever the skillful politician, he grew societal demands for greater freedoms by giving ground where necessary. He also used the institutions loyal to him – the judiciary, the IRGC and security services, and the Guardian Council – to suppress any meaningful change. His skill was most evident in how he discredited Khatami and the reformist political elite in the eyes of the public, drawing them into his toxic embrace when calls for change threatened regime stability. He also allowed Khatami leeway to negotiate and compromise with the West when the war on terrorism and the international focus on Iran's nuclear program threatened Iran's position. At the same time, he undermined these efforts and ensured that accountability for failure would land solely on Khatami and the reformists. The failures of the Khatami administration ushered in a sea change in the Iranian body politic, as reformists increasingly grew disaffected and the urban poor and working classes shifted their allegiances to the resurgent conservative movement, which used populist rhetoric to give the appearance that it would address their economic plight.

Ahmadinejad Presidency

After the Guardian Council blocked Khatami's legislative agenda and intervened to ensure hardliner domination in the 2003 and 2004 municipal and parliamentary elections, it appeared the government and populace were on a more conservative trajectory. However, the reality was somewhat more nuanced when it came to the public. Prosperity and living standards rose in general during the Khatami Administration, although the poor and working classes were largely left behind. The temporary expansion of press freedoms and greater access to the internet and higher education ensured that a broad swath of the population desired greater liberties even though they grew disillusioned with reformist politicians' inability or willingness to deliver.

The Rise of the Conservatives

The reformists had relied on two main constituencies for their electoral successes before their reversal of fortune; cosmopolitan, upwardly mobile, well-to-do Iranians and the urban poor and working classes. The reformist political establishment largely drew its cues from the former, and its policy agenda centered largely around increased cultural liberties. The reformists could not succeed without the latter's numbers, but the elites were out of touch when it came to understanding that the primary concerns of the poor and working classes were a fairer economy and less exploitative labor conditions.

Much like the 1997 election, the 2005 contest would feature a surprise victory by a dark horse candidate, although this time, the results were an endorsement rather than a rebuke of Khamenei's worldview. While his populist economic message had resonance, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's surprise victory cannot be fully explained by a wholesale rapid shift in the electorate from reformism to hardline neoconservatism. The most salient factor in Ahmadinejad's meteoric 2005 ascendance was the intervention by the IRGC and *basij* to mobilize voters on his behalf, further breaking the taboo on the IRGC's participation in politics and cementing its role as the most influential political actor on the scene. The 2005 election cycle featured numerous irregularities in which the IRGC may have played a role, but the IRGC's intimidation prevented potential fraud from roiling the country.

Ahmadinejad's ascent was highly improbable. Former President Rafsanjani ran for election again in 2005 and was widely considered the most probable victor, given his stature and outsized public persona

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compared to his challengers. The conventional wisdom was that Rafsanjani's pragmatic conservatism could appeal to moderate voters on the left and right, but the electorate had been largely polarized by the tumult of the previous eight years. As the head of the Expediency Council, Rafsanjani had played a pivotal role in stymying much of the reformist agenda, but he now pitched himself as a candidate whose gravitas and knowledge of the revolutionary system would enable him uniquely to break the gridlock of Iranian politics that he had contributed to.

Supreme Leader Khamenei had exiled his ally-turned-rival Rafsanjani to the relative backwoods of the Expediency Council to keep him in the regime's good graces while limiting his influence. Khamenei was wary that Rafsanjani's bid to revive his political fortunes would place him in a power struggle with a rival who had considerable economic resources to draw upon. While projecting a public air of neutrality, Khamenei maneuvered behind the scenes to hamstring Rafsanjani. For his part, Rafsanjani had palpable resentment toward Khamenei. After playing kingmaker during the succession saga, Rafsanjani was now unquestionably inferior in rank to the Supreme Leader. Iran expert Karim Sadjadpour offered [two anecdotes that illustrated the contentious nature of their relationship](#): "When told that Khamenei discouraged his candidacy in the 2005 presidential election, his chief adviser Mohammed Atrianfar retorted, "Rafsanjani is a pillar of this revolution, he doesn't need permission from anyone." Most remarkably, Rafsanjani's son told a visiting American reporter before the June 2005 presidential elections that, if elected, his father would change Iran's constitution to reduce Khamenei's power by making the position of Supreme Leader a ceremonial role akin to "the king of England."

The Guardian Council allowed eight candidates to stand for the election, increasing the probability that no candidate would win an outright majority from the outset, sparking a runoff between the two highest vote-getters. The Council approved former *majles* speaker Mehdi Karroubi, a moderate cleric who was allied with the reformists despite not fully sharing their ideology, to run from the outset to give the appearance of allowing competition. It blocked the main candidates the reformist political associations put forth, however, sparking public denunciations and demonstrations. While disdainful of reformism, Khamenei was adept at reading public sentiment and intervened to overrule the Guardian Council, allowing an uncharismatic reformist, Khatami's education minister Mostafa Moin, to run. Permitting Moin's candidacy benefited Khamenei tremendously. It undercut the reformists' efforts to gin up anger at the undemocratic nature of the system, mollifying the public enough to forestall massive demonstrations that may have ensued from a one-sided election. Moreover, it divided the reformists on how to strategize during the election. Some, like Akbar Ganji and his attorney, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi, [urged boycotts](#), depressing some reformist votes. In contrast, those who did vote were split, with religious voters largely backing the cleric, Karroubi, and more secular voters backing Moin.

The hardliners recognized Rafsanjani's potential vulnerabilities as a candidate and thought they could improbably place the presidency in principlist hands, but they, too, lacked a candidate of his stature. Rafsanjani's main challenger on the right was expected to be [Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf](#), a former IRGC Air Force commander and Tehran police chief who was believed to be [Khamenei's preferred candidate](#). Reformists loathed Qalibaf for his public-facing role in the crackdown on the 1999 student demonstrations. Initial [polling](#) showed Rafsanjani capturing 19 percent of the vote, with Qalibaf a

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distant second at 9 percent. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the firebrand Tehran mayor, was a little-known afterthought whom few took seriously, polling second-to-last with under 3 percent of the vote.

As the campaign season launched, Ahmadinejad was the only candidate to focus his strategy on [campaigning largely outside Tehran](#), preaching a populist economic message and portraying himself as a humble man of the people. His lack of ties to the unpopular political and clerical establishment, folksy manner of speech, and complete lack of pretensions buttressed his outsider appeal. Furthermore, unlike other candidates in the race, Ahmadinejad had served during the Iran-Iraq War (it is [disputed](#) whether he served in the IRGC or irregular *basij* forces), but not at the upper echelons of the IRGC. He was thus emblematic of the shared service and sacrifice of the war, which resonated with veterans and their families, but free of association with the military leadership that treated a generation like a cannon fodder.

Ahmadinejad [vowed](#) to take on the “oil mafia” and redistribute their profits to social spending for the Iranian people. As Ahmadinejad’s popularity grew, Qalibaf became dogged by allegations of financial irregularities. In the days before the election, Khamenei held a [meeting](#) with senior hardline and conservative leaders where the decision was made to collectively throw support to Ahmadinejad rather than Qalibaf. Khamenei’s representative to the IRGC sent a missive to the IRGC’s members advising them that while voting their conscience, they should select the candidate who most [embodied](#) obedience to the Supreme Leader, a modest and pious lifestyle, and an emphasis on social and economic justice. The implication of these attributes made clear that Ahmadinejad was the preferred candidate.

Once Khamenei decided to back Ahmadinejad, a plot unfolded that culminated in him improbably edging out Karroubi to come in second place in the first round of voting. The full extent of the conspiracy is unknown, but several leading figures have attested to its existence and the involvement of the IRGC and *basij*. For instance, Deputy IRGC commander General Zolqadr, admitted that there was a “multi-layered plan” to elect Ahmadinejad, [stating](#) that in “the complex situation where foreign powers had been plotting, one had to act in a complex manner!”

While the scope and dimensions of election rigging are unclear, it is certain that the IRGC and *basijis*, working through established mosque networks, helped mobilize turnout for Ahmadinejad, particularly among the urban poor and the families of veterans. However, the regime [took pains](#) to emphasize that the IRGC and *basij* involvement was not mandated from on high – claims disputed by reformists. When the first round results came in, Rafsanjani came in first with 6.1 million votes, Ahmadinejad in second with 5.7 million, and Karroubi in third with 5 million. Voter turnout was 62 percent, a relatively low figure for Iranian elections, reflecting that a subset of the reformists followed through with a boycott.

Several irregularities came to light which pointed to interference by the Guardian Council, IRGC, and *basij* on Ahmadinejad’s behalf. Supervising the election results was typically the purview of the Interior Ministry, but after voting closed, the Guardian Council [announced](#) after an [unusual delay](#) that 21 million votes had been cast, in contrast with the Interior Ministry’s announcement that 15 million people had voted. The Guardian Council’s higher tally favored Ahmadinejad, further questioning the process. The *basij*, which heavily favored Ahmadinejad, had been tapped to provide security at polling places around

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the country. After the election, they faced allegations of [intimidating voters](#) and [ballot stuffing](#). Reports also emerged of *basijis* using the [unexpired birth certificates](#) of recently deceased citizens and casting multiple votes from the deceased. In South Khorasan, a province with a largely restive Sunni population, a journalist found that [298,000 votes had been cast among 270,000 eligible voters](#). More shockingly, Ahmadinejad, representing a militant form of Shi'ism, first appeared in the province.

Karroubi and Moin, the two reformist candidates, quickly [alleged fraud](#) after the vote results. Karroubi alleged that the Guardian Council would have given the election to Ahmadinejad without counting the votes if it could and accused IRGC leaders of illegally campaigning for Ahmadinejad. Moin issued a statement containing thinly veiled accusations of a conspiracy, saying, "A powerful will entered the arena bent on the victory of a particular candidate and the elimination of the other candidates and opened the way to the organization of some military bodies and the support of the election supervisory apparatus, so that the self-evident rights of the other candidates could be targeted. Today, anyone can clearly see the effect of this organized interference on the election results." Moin further warned that this organized electoral interference would lead Iran down a path toward "militarism, authoritarianism, and narrow-mindedness."

Despite their brazen efforts to elevate Ahmadinejad through any means necessary, Khamenei and the top brass of the IRGC were sensitive to the appearances of electoral engineering and wary of mass demonstrations. Rafsanjani registered a [protest](#) about the suspicious vote with Khamenei and threatened to withdraw from the race, but Khamenei convinced him to remain and drop his objections for the regime's good and to avoid playing into Western propaganda narratives skeptical of Iranian democracy. Figuring that he was in a strong position to win the runoff, especially if he could capture the votes that went to Karroubi and Moin, Rafsanjani complied. Karroubi, who narrowly missed out on making the runoff under dubious circumstances, continued to protest the legitimacy of the election vigorously. This allowed Rafsanjani to remain a regime insider, even while remaining a rival of Khamenei, after the election, while Karroubi and other prominent reformists were increasingly marginalized and less tolerated.

Now that the race had narrowed to just Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani, the contrast between the outsider, everyman, working-class avatar and the corrupt, opulent, and out-of-touch establishment scion came into stark relief. The conservative factions, urban poor, and those who served in or revered the IRGC and *basij* coalesced around Ahmadinejad, while Rafsanjani's coalition was fractious. The reformists remained bitter about the railroading of Karroubi, and Rafsanjani had failed to endear himself to them during the election season. Rafsanjani did not campaign nearly as actively as Ahmadinejad, attempting to coast off name recognition and the appearance of being perceived as more serious and presidential. Lacking a broad natural constituency, when Rafsanjani did campaign, the results were disastrous. While speaking at the University of Tehran, reformist students in the audience [began chanting Akbar Ganji](#), demanding freedom for the journalist who had exposed Rafsanjani's role in the "chain murders." Rafsanjani responded to their outrage by pointing out that prison conditions in the Islamic Republic were better than under the Shah. Rafsanjani's glib remark indicted the Islamic Republic regime, whose founders sold a vision of moving beyond the Shah's oppression but instead replicated

and repurposed his feared security and intelligence apparatus. Moreover, it mocked the reformists' demands for a more free and just society.

While Ahmadinejad had a clear edge in enthusiasm among his supporters, he unlikely had the numbers to win the election legitimately. It [defied credulity](#) when he won the run-off with over 60 percent of the vote. Turnout for the runoff was 3 percent less than the first round, indicating more reformists opted to boycott than before. But for the final tally to have been plausible, large numbers of voters who backed left-of-center candidates in the first round would have had to have switched their allegiances to Ahmadinejad or have stayed home. In contrast, nearly equal numbers of voters who sat out now opted to cast ballots for Ahmadinejad. Rafsanjani again protested the irregular results but had no recourse to challenge the election without destabilizing the regime's foundations.

Ahmadinejad's Electoral Victory



(L-R) President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#)

Ahmadinejad's election was one of the greatest triumphs of Khamenei's tenure as Supreme Leader. The dubious, surprise victory cemented Khamenei's preeminence over Rafsanjani. Further, his rival was humiliated and exposed as deeply unpopular. For the first time, Khamenei now had a deferential president whose ideology was almost completely aligned with his own. Khamenei was now free to set the national agenda he saw fit without concerns over friction with his president. As such, Ahmadinejad was given wide latitude to speak freely and execute Khamenei's agenda. With Khamenei's blessing, Ahmadinejad sought to restore the ideals of Islam and the Islamic Revolution as the basis for policymaking. This entailed elevating the role of the IRGC in public life, abandoning reconciliation and embracing a confrontational approach to the West, aggressively advancing Iran's [nuclear](#) and [ballistic missile](#)

programs, and seeking to lead unified resistance by the Muslim world against the U.S., Israel, and regional governments allied with the U.S.

Ahmadinejad's dark-horse victory aroused contempt and derision from middle-class Iranians appalled by his uncouth manner and ignorant statements. Many conservative politicians more aligned with the establishment had their own issues with Ahmadinejad, whose brashness and outsider status threatened their interests. The constant drumbeat of scorn drew his support base of working class, more religiously observant citizens closer to him, as they felt similarly looked down upon by more secular, cosmopolitan cultural elitists.

From the outset, Ahmadinejad set out to take a blowtorch to the domestic and foreign policy agendas of his more liberal predecessors. Ahmadinejad clarified that he saw his mandate as president to restore the Islamic Republic to following the path of Khomeinist principles, particularly when enforcing religious

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morality in society and countering U.S. and Western imperialism. He had campaigned largely on bread-and-butter economic issues, framing his populist promises for economic redistribution as fulfilling the social justice promises of Khomeini's revolution. Once in power, however, his primary preoccupations were with national security and Iran's role in international affairs.

As part of his faithfulness to upholding the principles of the Islamic Revolution, he was devoted to the concept of *velayat-e faqih* and keen to demonstrate his loyalty to the Supreme Leader. While respectful of Khamenei's position within the system and aware of the need to stay in his good graces, he was [less deferential to the rest of the political establishment](#), viewing his independence and outsider status as an asset. This led to friction as he tried to assert himself by selecting his men for cabinet positions, leading to the conservative-dominated *majles* rejecting several of his selections. After much wrangling, he nevertheless succeeded in installing a principlist-heavy cabinet.

Ahmadinejad's rise would not have been possible without the machinations of the IRGC and *basij*, and he rewarded them handsomely for their support, most notably by appointing [12 out of his 18 cabinet picks](#) and over half of the provincial governors from the ranks of the IRGC officer corps. Ahmadinejad was the Islamic Republic's first soldier turned president, and his administration was the catalyst for the overt encroachment of the IRGC into the political sphere. Following efforts during the Khatami administration to weaken the IRGC and break its stranglehold over the economy, the IRGC was no longer mollified by efforts to bribe them out of politics. With Ahmadinejad's ascent and Khamenei's blessing, they now had an entrée into the government.

Once entrenched, the IRGC was able to grease the wheels to expand its economic and political power. The president and *majles* immediately [expanded](#) the development budget by 74 percent, creating new opportunities for the IRGC and *basij* to enrich themselves through energy and infrastructure projects. During the Khatami administration, efforts were made to prevent the IRGC from entering strategic sectors such as petroleum to keep some check on the IRGC's power, but these restrictions evaporated under Ahmadinejad to the point that the head of [Khatam Al-Anbiya \(KAA\)](#), Rostam Qassemi, was appointed oil minister during his second term. By the end of 2006, the government had steered more than 250 projects to KAA, often through no-bid contracts, including billion-dollar-plus projects to build the Tehran metro, develop oil and natural gas fields, and build a gas pipeline.

Unlike his predecessors, Ahmadinejad insisted there was no need for rapprochement with the "Great Satan," an assessment shared by Supreme Leader Khamenei. Khamenei felt that improving ties with the U.S. betrayed the Khomeinist ethos. He had reluctantly allowed Khatami and Rafsanjani latitude to explore the prospect. However, efforts to improve relations quickly went up in smoke due to Ahmadinejad's incendiary rhetoric on the world stage. Khatami had presented a smiling visage and outstretched hand to the West, while Ahmadinejad gave a clenched fist. To many in the West, Ahmadinejad represented the true, militant face of the Islamic Republic, intransigently committed to terrorism, regional destabilization, human rights abuses, and the pursuit of nuclear weapons. Iran's international image came to be represented by Ahmadinejad's anti-American, anti-Semitic proclamations and policies, and he drastically eclipsed Khamenei's public profile.

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An Anti-Western Foreign Policy

By his election, the U.S. was increasingly bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Israel was contending with the Second Palestinian Intifada. Both were at the nadir of their popularity in the Arab and Muslim world, and Ahmadinejad positioned himself as the leader of Islamic resistance to American and Zionist imperialism. Although he was not in charge of directing Iran's foreign and military policy, his presidency synched up with Iran taking on a more assertive anti-Western role in the region and building its influence as a counterweight to the U.S. Iran was ascendant in the region during Ahmadinejad's first term, buoyed by the IRGC-Quds Force's support to Hezbollah during the 2006 conflict with Israel and to various Iraqi militias that helped bleed the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Iran was increasingly able to dictate events and paralyze politics in neighboring countries, particularly Lebanon and Iraq. Iran and its "resistance axis" [prestige](#) grew among the Muslim public during this time, as Iran was perceived as the only force willing to confront the U.S. and Israel.

Ahmadinejad had been extremely critical of the Khatami administration's negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. With the urgency fading due to the U.S.'s increasing entanglement in the region, Khamenei empowered Ahmadinejad to go on the offensive. While he had acquiesced to negotiations under intensifying pressure, Khamenei now [freely railed](#) against the process, insisting Iran was not seeking nuclear weapons and that the West, which feared Iran's scientific progress would help it achieve regional leadership, was using negotiations to dominate and weaken Iran. Khamenei called on Ahmadinejad and the Iranian nation to resist compromising over Iran's nuclear rights, and Iran subsequently adopted a more defiant tone and began accelerating its nuclear program accordingly.

Following Khatami's suspension of enrichment activities, the E3 drafted a framework agreement for a permanent resolution to the Iranian nuclear impasse. The E3 presented their draft shortly after Ahmadinejad's inauguration, and his government promptly [rejected](#) it, labeling the proposal an insult. [Hassan Rouhani](#), a moderate cleric head of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, promptly resigned, recognizing that there would be no diplomacy path under Ahmadinejad. He was replaced by Ali Larijani, a hardline figure who was influential within Khamenei's inner circle.

Ahmadinejad introduced his incendiary approach to nuclear diplomacy on the world stage just a month into his presidency, making his first address to the U.N. General Assembly in September 2005. While his rhetoric was more fiery than Khamenei's, his ideological and policy commitments accurately represented the Supreme Leader's will. In his address, Ahmadinejad insisted that Iran did not seek "inhuman" nuclear or Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) capabilities and that reactionary global forces were seeking to deprive Iran of peaceful nuclear technology based on false allegations. He railed against the hypocrisy of Israel possessing nuclear weapons. At the same time, international powers sought to restrict Iranian nuclear progress, warning that allowing only powerful nations to monopolize nuclear resources would create a global nuclear apartheid, widening the gap between developed and developing nations such as Iran. He then [threatened](#), "if some try to impose their will on the Iranian people by resorting to a language of force and threat with Iran, we will reconsider our entire approach to the nuclear issue."

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Ahmadinejad followed up his inaugural UNGA address by denouncing EU representatives as U.S. lackeys in a meeting on the sidelines, ruffling feathers with his blunt approach to diplomacy. A month later, he courted further international opprobrium while addressing a Tehran student conference titled “The World Without Zionism” by calling for Israel’s eradication. There, he made [remarks](#) that “Anybody who recognizes Israel will burn in the fire of the Islamic nation’s fury, [while] any [Islamic leader] who recognizes the Zionist regime means he is acknowledging the surrender and defeat of the Islamic world. ... As the Imam said, Israel must be wiped off the map.” In December 2005, Ahmadinejad accused Zionist forces of instrumentalizing the Holocaust, which he referred to as a “[myth](#),” as a cudgel to obtain unqualified support by Western governments for the existence and conduct of the state of Israel.

With the international community increasingly perturbed by Ahmadinejad’s threats and Holocaust denialism, he announced in early 2006 that Iran had begun enriching uranium at Natanz and had now mastered the nuclear fuel cycle indigenously and could enrich at an industrial scale. The U.N. Security Council subsequently demanded that Iran ceased all enrichment and reprocessing activities in July 2006 and, after it failed to comply, passed six resolutions increasingly sanctioning Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile program and imposing an international arms embargo between December 2006 and June 2011. Khamenei responded defiantly to the international calls for Iran to comply with its nuclear obligations, framing Iran’s nuclear pursuit as part of its revolutionary “resistance” paradigm. “They know that we are not after nuclear weapons. They are unhappy about scientific progress in an Islamic state, a country that has not surrendered to the policies of the United States, a country that has shown it is not afraid of America. They don’t want us to have the most important technology in the world, which is nuclear technology. But we have made our decision and are determined to continue the path of struggle that we opted for twenty-seven years ago,” [warned](#) Khamenei in August 2006. Khamenei and Ahmadinejad responded to the imposition of multilateral sanctions by escalating Iran’s illicit nuclear activities, enriching and stockpiling uranium to 20 percent purity by 2008. Like Rouhani before him, chief negotiator Ali Larijani recognized that nuclear diplomacy was futile and resigned in October 2007. He was replaced with the even more radical figure [Saeed Jalili](#), who shared Ahmadinejad’s and Khamenei’s complete resistance to compromising over Iran’s nuclear pursuits.

The imposition of increasingly robust and multilateral sanctions during Ahmadinejad’s tenure further enhanced the economic clout of the IRGC at the expense of ordinary Iranians. While the sanctions caused hardships for legitimate businesses, the IRGC established [smuggling networks](#) to circumvent them and sell oil and gas to neighboring countries. As the IRGC’s fortunes rose, Ahmadinejad’s populist economic promises largely fell by the wayside and were exposed as hollow. Rather than systemically increase social spending, Ahmadinejad sought to coopt his poor and working-class base through crude cash handouts and subsidies on staple goods. Although oil revenues increased dramatically in the first years of his presidency before sanctions kicked in, social expenditures on healthcare, education, and housing [remained stagnant](#).

The direct infusion of cash stimulus to the poor created inflationary pressures, which only worsened as sanctions took effect. Also, a housing bubble developed. This benefitted the rich, who were more likely to own homes and shut poor and middle-class Iranians out of the housing market, widening the gap between rich and poor. Living costs outstripped wage growth, and many working Iranians fell below the

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poverty line while unemployment rose steadily. Further exacerbating matters was Ahmadinejad's efforts to resurrect Rafsanjani's privatization program. Para-statal institutions such as the IRGC and *bonyads* dominated the privatization landscape, ensuring Iran's resources were transferred to the hands of militant forces aligned with Khamenei. Ahmadinejad had sought to mitigate against this outcome by [allocating](#) 40 percent of the assets available for privatization for sale to collectives of qualifying low-income individuals at subsidized rates, a program referred to as "justice shares." However, the IRGC, *bonyads*, and other business elites could quickly snap up the bulk of these shares as the low-income recipients were predictably willing to turn a quick profit and sell to well-heeled entities. The factional competition for economic resources was settled during this period, and the IRGC came out as the biggest winner, while the poor and working-class Iranians who had enthusiastically supported Ahmadinejad continued to get squeezed.

The economic and political rise of the IRGC and the failure to deliver material benefits to the working class set the backdrop for the 2009 Iranian presidential election. Rising tensions with the U.S. were another significant factor shaping the election and its aftermath. Throughout the second term of the Bush Administration, speculation persisted that the U.S. sought a military confrontation with Iran as the next major plank of its freedom agenda. Iran became increasingly assertive, attacking U.S. forces in [Iraq](#) through its proxies. Iranian-manufactured explosives proliferated as the IRGC-Quds Force entrenched its presence, training, equipping, and directing the battlefield activities of Shi'a militias.

The struggles of the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan dampened public appetite for further military action, but the U.S. Senate gave President Bush tacit approval for potential military action with Iran in the form of an amendment to the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act authored by Sens. John Kyl (R-AZ) and Joseph Lieberman (I-CT). The amendment [stated](#) that through the IRGC-Quds Force, Iran was turning "Shia militia extremists in Iraq into a Hezbollah-like force that could serve [Iranian] interests." To preserve American national security interests, "it should be the policy (of the U.S. government) to combat, contain, and roll back the violent activities and destabilizing influence" of Iran and its proxies in Iraq. The most significant consequence of the amendment was the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization, which gave the U.S. Department of the Treasury authority to target the IRGC's financial holdings outside of Iran.

Khamenei's suspicions of the U.S. remained heightened during this period, and he used the specter of American hostility to the Islamic Republic to blame Iran's internal problems on foreign interference. Khamenei saw pro-democracy activism and journalism as part of a U.S.-backed plot to usher in a soft revolution similar to those that had broken out in authoritarian former Soviet republics during the George W. Bush administration. In the months leading up to the 2009 election, Iranian authorities arrested numerous academics and journalists suspected of stoking anti-regime sentiment. Khamenei similarly suspected U.S. intelligence services of backing an uptick in insurgent activity and terrorism by Sunni and Kurdish ethnic separatist movements, believing the U.S. was pursuing a strategy similar to its support of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In response to the growing paranoia over U.S. interference in Iran, the IRGC chief [Mohammad Ali Jafari](#), who had replaced Yahya Rahim Safavi in 2007, initiated an [overhaul](#) of the IRGC's strategic defense posture, giving the IRGC and *basij* a more prominent role in internal security. Jafari established separate,

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largely autonomous commands for each province in Iran, enabling each to respond to internal security challenges without overreliance on centralized planning. The *basij* were brought under Jafari's direct command, and their mission was transformed from a primarily military focus to one concentrated on domestic security and political and ideological activism. Battalions of *basij* were dispatched to each province to act as the shock troops and enforcers of the IRGC's efforts to maintain domestic stability and ensure the predominance of Khomeinist ideology.

The transition in U.S. administrations from President Bush to Obama, who eschewed the former's militarism and unilateralism in favor of a diplomacy-centric approach, did little to assuage Khamenei. President Obama's first outreach to the Islamic Republic came in the form of a *Nowruz* greeting in March 2009, in which he called for diplomatic engagement grounded in honesty and mutual respect to resolve all outstanding issues between the two countries. Khamenei's response was instantly dismissive, insisting that change could only be achieved when the U.S. ceased its inherent hostility to the Islamic Republic. In an address to followers in Mashhad, Khamenei said, "They chant the slogan of change but no change is seen in practice. ... As long as the U.S. government continues the same policies and directions of the previous 30 years, we will be the same nation of the past 30 years. ... He [Obama] insulted the Islamic Republic of Iran from the first day. ... Have you released Iranian assets? Have you lifted oppressive sanctions? Have you given up mudslinging and making accusations against the great Iranian nation and its officials? Have you given up your unconditional support for the Zionist regime?"

Despite Khamenei's clenched fist, Iranians sympathetic to the reformist movement were buoyed by Obama's ascension and hopeful that his promises for a more diplomatic and conciliatory approach to foreign policy could reverse the enmity that had taken root in U.S.-Iranian relations. Horrified by the increasingly confrontational and repressive trajectory Iran had taken under Ahmadinejad, the reformist movement saw the need to abandon the disunity and disarray that enabled Ahmadinejad's rise and the Iranian neoconservative current.

The 2009 Electoral Coup

Although he harbored misgivings that he would again be stymied from governance by Khamenei and the IRGC were he to win office, in February 2009, former President Khatami announced his intention to seek the presidency. Based on name recognition and nostalgia, Khatami seemed like the most viable candidate to win an election against Ahmadinejad, whose iconoclasm and economic shortcomings had dampened enthusiasm among many less extreme conservative Iranians. Ayatollah Khamenei was [reportedly](#) enraged by Khatami's announcement of his candidacy, and he disregarded physical attacks and death threats against Khatami by militant Ahmadinejad backers. Recognizing he was unlikely to pass the Guardian Council's vetting, Khatami withdrew from the race and threw his backing behind former Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Khamenei's most hated rival, who reluctantly emerged from the political wilderness to challenge Ahmadinejad.

After Khamenei prevailed to become Supreme Leader and the post of prime minister was abolished, Mousavi spent his time teaching at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran and serving as the head of the Iranian Academy of Art. He remained a popular figure due to his managerial competence, keeping the Iranian economy afloat during the Iran-Iraq War, and was perpetually courted as a candidate for higher office, but he stayed out of the political realm and the limelight due to implicit threats from Khamenei,

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[according](#) to his wife, who played a prominent role in his campaign. Khatami viewed himself as primarily a cultural rather than political figure and endorsed Mousavi, citing his confidence that Mousavi would be more adept at governing and significantly reforming the Islamic Republican system.

The Guardian Council sought to avoid triggering public unrest and approved Mousavi's candidacy without objection from Khamenei, assuming he would be unable to gain traction due to his lack of charisma and long absence from public life and politics. The Council also approved Mehdi Karroubi, who had been edged out by Ahmadinejad in the first round of voting in 2005, hoping this would split the reformist vote. Former IRGC commander and perennial candidate Mohsen Rezaei served as the token conservative challenger to Ahmadinejad.

Khamenei's decision to allow Mousavi and Karroubi to run showed that he underestimated the resilience of the public's desire for the reformist agenda. He had cracked down on the 1999 student protests and engineered Ahmadinejad's 2005 electoral victory without shaking the foundations of the revolutionary system. In the 2008 *majles* elections, conservatives [gained further](#) as the Guardian Council banned more than 1,700 reformist and independent candidates. Iranian voters responded with cynicism and apathy rather than unrest, fueling Khamenei's complacent belief that principlists had prevailed over reformism and no serious challenge to his authority or agenda would arise.

In the run up to the election, the reformist movement quickly coalesced around Mousavi, with every major reformist organ and faction backing him except for Karroubi's National Trust Party. Mousavi also welcomed the support of Rafsanjani, understanding that the reformists could not afford to alienate him and his constituency in order to erect the broadest tent possible. Over time, the Islamic Left's economic outlook had become less explicitly statist. As a candidate, Mousavi backed neoliberal reforms and a strong role for markets, giving Ahmadinejad grounds to claim he was the true populist champion of the poor and working classes. Ahmadinejad also [seized upon Rafsanjani's support](#) for Mousavi, alleging that Mousavi was tied to the powerful former president's corruption.

Despite Khamenei's personal animus toward him, Mousavi was not an overly liberal figure nor one who sought to replace the Islamic Republican regime. It, therefore, came as a shock that Mousavi became the locus for a groundswell of support by an Iranian youth that saw him as a vehicle for reinvigorating democratic aspirations and winning greater personal liberties. Mousavi's appeal grew because of his plain-spokenness and his authentic lack of desire for power. His return from political exile had nothing to do with his ambitions. He saw Khamenei's increasing usurpation of power and Ahmadinejad's fiery extremism as leading Iran down the path to dictatorship and calamity. He believed strongly in the need for reforms to preserve the Islamic Revolution.

The 2009 presidential campaign was the most open in providing the electorate with competing visions for Iran's future and the most acrimonious. Mousavi [stated](#) that Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and agenda were "harmful to the Revolution, the country, and its good name," while Ahmadinejad accused Mousavi of adopting "[Hitler's methods](#)" by repeating lies and accusations against his government and called for him to be jailed for insulting the president. Mousavi's denunciations of Ahmadinejad and promises of reform, as well as a strong showing in the televised debate, galvanized enthusiastic support from the portions of the electorate that supported reformism or just opposed Ahmadinejad, and [polling](#) showed

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Mousavi gaining a strong edge, particularly in urban centers. If turnout was high, particularly in Tehran and other cities, victory seemed assured for Mousavi.

Mousavi's ascension represented a nightmare scenario for Khamenei, and he set to work in tandem with the IRGC to place the thumb on the scales in Ahmadinejad's favor. In late May, a [confidential letter](#) from Khamenei's representative to the IRGC was made public, in which he advised the IRGC that Khamenei had been "clear" that Ahmadinejad should be reelected. Ahmadinejad had filled out the senior ranks of the Interior Ministry, the body tasked with administering the election and tallying the vote, with former IRGC officers and hardline loyalists. In the days leading up to the election, the *basij* were tasked with providing security at polling places. Ahmadinejad and IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari warned that Mousavi's supporters would likely try to foment unrest if they lost, and unprecedentedly large numbers of IRGC and *basij* security forces were dispatched to Tehran and other cities to maintain order.

The June 12, 2009, presidential election was [marked by reports](#) of turnout topping 80 percent, which boded well for Mousavi, and exit polls seemingly corroborated a strong showing. There were also reports of irregularities, such as *basij* voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, deceased voters casting ballots, and votes exceeding the pool of registered voters in provinces that were bastions of Ahmadinejad's support. On election day, when it became apparent that turnout was extremely high, the regime shut down mobile phone and internet communications in Tehran. It used satellite jamming of news broadcasts to try and blunt Mousavi's momentum and forestall a potential mass uprising ahead of the announcement of the preordained results. As the polls closed, regime security forces blockaded the Interior Ministry, a likely protest site, and warned that anyone approaching would be shot.

While the reformists had come to expect some cheating at the margins, the Interior Ministry defied credulity, announcing rapidly after the polls closed and before they could have tallied the vote that Ahmadinejad had won the election handily. The following day, the Interior Ministry announced their final tally was 62-33 percent in favor of Ahmadinejad, an improbably lopsided victory immediately triggered widespread condemnations of the apparently rigged contest. Outraged supporters of Mousavi immediately staged demonstrations. Mousavi demanded an investigation and denounced the results as a "[dangerous charade](#)" that would erode the Islamic Republic's republicanism and usher in tyranny. Despite the obvious rigging and rapidly growing public anger, Khamenei immediately affirmed the election results as a "[divine assessment](#)," warning that "enemies" would seek to stoke unrest by challenging the election's legitimacy. Khamenei thereby set the precedent of declaring opposition to the election results as sedition, setting the stage for suppressing the emerging protest movement.

The Green Movement

Immediately after the results were announced, peaceful demonstrations began and quickly grew in size, [initially](#) overwhelming and paralyzing the regime's security forces. In the early going, riot police provided the first line of security, beating back advancing demonstrators with tear gas and brute force. As images of violence spread, the protests grew and soon were the largest Iran had witnessed since the Islamic Revolution, dwarfing the 1999 student protests that were their direct antecedent. The regime [moved](#) to block internet access in a bid to thwart the protestors' ability to organize and undertook a censorship campaign to suppress images of the violence from circulating in Iran and abroad, but the protests continued to grow and become increasingly chaotic and violent in response to the regime's aggression.

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Mousavi had called for a protest march on June 15, 2009, but as the demonstrations spiraled out of control, he withdrew his support for the event both to preserve the regime's stability and not run afoul of Khamenei and the security apparatus, who warned him that any large-scale protests would be deemed illegal. Despite his efforts, the groundswell of popular resentment carried on unabated, and more than [a million Iranians](#) took to the streets that day, indicating a leaderless, grassroots uprising was underway. Mousavi ultimately decided to join the protests as part of the mass of demonstrators rather than at the forefront. The protestors' ire was largely aimed at Ahmadinejad. However, over the day, they increasingly broke the taboo of challenging Khamenei and the corrupt Islamic Republican system, with spontaneous chants of "death to the dictator" breaking out quietly and growing increasingly frequent and loud.

The mounting demonstrations over the disputed election results posed a clear crisis of legitimacy for Khamenei and the regime. However, Khamenei opted to respond with repression rather than give in to the demands to nullify and redo the election. By the end of the day on June 15, the IRGC, tasked with the nationwide response to the protests, [dispatched](#) units of both plainclothes and uniformed *basijis* and Ansar-e Hezbollah volunteers to confront the protestors. With many riding motorcycles through the crowds, scenes abounded of *basijis* beating protestors with clubs to disperse them. There were numerous reports of indiscriminate gunfire during the demonstrations, and the protestors became increasingly violent. At least 30 protestors died in clashes around the country on June 15. The following day, the regime moved to arrest various leading reformist and human rights leaders to curb the movement's organizational capabilities.

Buoyed by the demonstrators' growing strength and refusal to be cowed, Mousavi opted to increasingly take on the leadership mantle of the protest movement, directing his supporters to [adopt the color green](#) due to its resonance in Islam. This suggested that the burgeoning "Green Movement" was acting in accordance with and inspired by Islamic principles, challenging the hardliners' hegemonic claims to be the authentic representatives of Islam.

Clashes continued in the ensuing days as Mousavi supporters held further demonstrations to challenge the election results and mourn those killed. In contrast, supporters of Ahmadinejad and Khamenei staged counterprotests. On Friday, June 19, Khamenei gave an [incendiary Friday prayer sermon](#) in which he reiterated that the results were valid and warned of an impending crackdown. To intimidate Mousavi, Khamenei warned that opposition leaders who failed to rein in the demonstrations "[would be responsible for bloodshed and chaos.](#)" Khamenei insisted it would have been impossible to rig a victory of Ahmadinejad's wide margin and stated that the president could be chosen only through the ballot box and not through street protests. Finally, he deflected blame for the crisis onto Iran's enemies, whom he claimed were seeking to foment unrest by depicting Ahmadinejad's "[definitive](#)" victory as "doubtful." Khamenei typically preferred to operate behind the scenes. However, his sermon represented him taking sides with the hardline faction against the reformists in an unprecedented public way and effectively ruling out any hopes for a compromise. Khamenei had made clear that he viewed continued unrest over the election results as a foreign-backed plot that threatened the fabric of the Islamic Republican system.

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Despite Khamenei's attempt to intimidate the Green Movement and its leaders and warnings from the police and IRGC, thousands of protestors took to the streets the day after Khamenei's sermon, and sporadic demonstrations continued over the following months. Khamenei tasked the IRGC with coordinating the nationwide response to quelling the unrest as part of its overarching *raison d'être* to safeguard the Islamic Revolution against foreign and domestic threats. The IRGC seized on Khamenei's effective declaration of war on the protests to increase their ruthlessness and brutality in suppressing the demonstrations. On June 20, the day after Khamenei's sermon, a *basiji* shot into a crowd of demonstrators and killed a 26-year-old Iranian woman, Neda Agha-Soltani. Video footage of her death rapidly spread through Iran and worldwide, provoking outrage over the regime's wanton excesses. Neda became an enduring symbol of the "Green Movement," highlighting the citizenry's willingness to risk their lives for greater rights and freedoms. Recognizing the stark contrast between the ostensible principles of the Islamic Revolution and its actual treatment of its citizens, the regime sought to [deflect blame](#) for Neda's killing onto assorted enemies such as the MEK, Zionists, and the foreign media.

The continued growth of the protest movement in the face of increased repression heightened Khamenei and the IRGC's paranoia, and they saw evidence of foreign plots and a conspiracy to impose a velvet revolution all around them. The Obama administration was sensitive to the history of Western intervention in Iranian affairs and did not want to give the regime ammunition to delegitimize the organic protest movement following the rigged election. In the early days of the protests, as scenes of the regime's brutality emerged, President Obama gave a [tepid](#) response, calling upon the Islamic Republic's regime to uphold the rule of law and human rights but stopping short of calling the election fraudulent or laying out consequences for egregious abuses by the regime. Despite Obama's caution, IRGC officials [continued to accuse](#) the demonstrators of cooperating with the U.S. and other enemies of Iran in pursuit of regime change, justifying their increasingly harsh crackdown.

In the ensuing weeks, the protests dwindled under the IRGC-directed suppression effort enforced by riot police and *basijis*. It became increasingly clear that Khamenei would not compromise under pressure and was willing to kill and torture his opponents to maintain his iron grip and clear the streets of protestors. During the Islamic Revolution, Khamenei witnessed the Shah admit to past excesses to pacify the swelling protests. However, the Shah's gambit backfired and only emboldened the protestors, culminating in his removal from power. Determined not to repeat the Shah's mistakes, Khamenei became increasingly reluctant to give an inch to the protestors and relied more heavily on the IRGC and the sprawling security apparatus under his control. The regime's [brutal response](#) included efforts to control the internet and censor the dissemination of imagery that would paint the regime in a negative light, arrests of journalists and Green Movement leaders, mass arrests of thousands of protestors and activist leaders, reports of torture and rape under regime custody, and show trials and forced confessions of opposition activists. Opposition leaders [claimed](#) at least 70 citizens were killed during the protests or in regime custody, although the true death toll was likely higher.

While the IRGC-led suppression effort succeeded in dissipating the protests, the Green Movement persisted for months after the fraudulent election. To prevent protests around Ahmadinejad's second inauguration, the regime conducted [show trials](#) of over 140 prominent reformist politicians, journalists, academics, and activists on August 1, 2009. The defendants had suffered torture at the hands of Iranian

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security forces, and many offered coerced confessions of plotting a color revolution at the behest of foreign powers. Despite the farcical nature of the proceedings, Khamenei and the security apparatus used the trials as a pretext to further delegitimize reformism and push those with reformist predilections further away from the centers of power within the Islamic Republic, which was increasingly concentrated in the hands of hardliners aligned with Khamenei's principlist ideology.

[Public holidays and national days of commemoration](#) provided the impetus for the resumption of widespread demonstrations, which increasingly challenged the legitimacy of Khamenei and the revolutionary system rather than just the stolen election. Each wave of protest was met in kind by increasingly wanton repression, culminating in a showdown between the Green Movement and security forces on December 27, 2009, the day of Ashura. During the period leading up to the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini's followers used the symbolism of Ashura to muster the fiercest and most widespread resistance to the Shah's rule. The Green Movement now sought to coopt that same symbolism to galvanize opposition to Khamenei and the revolutionary system he presided over. He argued that the Islamic Republic represented the latest corrupt iteration of dictatorship despite its Islamic veneer.

The Ashura protests in 2009 coincided with the culmination of a seven-day mourning period for the death of Ayatollah Montazeri, Khomeini's former heir apparent and the senior-most ayatollah in Iran at the time of his death. Montazeri's criticisms of the excesses of the revolutionary regime made him the spiritual leader of Iran's reformist movement, and his denunciations of the fraudulent election buoyed the Green Movement and helped counteract propaganda that the protestors were foreign agents acting against Iran's revolutionary Islamism. The Green Movement sought to portray Montazeri as the [modern-day equivalent of Hussein](#), whose martyrdom at the hands of oppressive rulers Ashura commemorated and used the occasion of his funeral to revive demonstrations. Montazeri's death placed the regime between a rock and a hard place, as it could not ban processions for the revered figure outright despite his fierce criticisms of Khamenei. Despite a heavy security presence, hundreds of thousands of mourners staged what turned into the largest opposition rally in months, daring Khamenei and his security services to mimic the role of the oppressive Umayyad Caliph Yazid. During the pre-revolutionary period, Ayatollah Khomeini had painted the Shah as the inheritor of Yazid's legacy, but now, the Green Movement cast Khamenei in the same light. While sensitive to the potency of such symbolism, Khamenei's forces ultimately opted to [crack down](#) against Montazeri's mourners with batons, tear gas, and pepper spray.

Ahead of Ashura, Khamenei was determined to finally break the Green Movement's back. Iranian authorities canceled all leave for security and emergency personnel and placed hospitals on alert for massive casualties in anticipation of intensified violent clashes. Demonstrators braved the ominous signs and staged massive protests nationwide, with the largest protests concentrated in Tehran. With protestors increasingly directing their ire at Khamenei, the day's violence reached its [apex](#) as they seized a police kiosk in Vali Asr Square, prompting the police to drive a car through the crowd of protestors. Multiple deaths, scores of injuries, and thousands of arrests were reported around Iran that day. The violent crackdown on the 2009 Ashura protests further eroded Khamenei's political and religious legitimacy, as it was unprecedented and taboo for his purportedly clerical regime to unleash violence against the citizenry on a holy day.

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The Green Movement sought to use the February 2010 day of commemoration of the Islamic Revolution as the next opportunity to challenge the regime. However, by this time, Khamenei and his security forces [pulled out all the stops](#) ahead of the holiday to ensure the movement's failure. The regime shut down internet servers and mobile networks ahead of the day, blocking opposition activists and organizers from being able to coordinate, and throngs of pro-regime loyalists and *basijis* were bussed into key public squares in a massive show of force. As a result, the movement's leaders called off their planned protests, effectively marking the end of the Green Movement's phase of street-level activism. The Green Movement entered a period of soul-searching as it considered new tactics and strategies to channel popular discontent with Khamenei and the regime. However, the movement had ultimately been defeated. A year later, in February 2011, with the Arab Spring protests roiling the region and stoking fears in authoritarian governments, regime security forces placed Mousavi and Karroubi [under house arrest, where they remain to the present day](#), after calling for solidarity with the demonstrations for democracy.

Khamenei's ultimate suppression of the Green Movement in the aftermath of the fraudulent 2009 election consolidated power further in his hands but came at great cost as it marked a fundamental transformation of the Islamic Republic. The regime could no longer credibly claim to derive any authority from the consent of the governed, and its claims to legitimacy through divine right were challenged further by its deviation from Islamic law and morality in violently repressing the protests. The regime's response to the protests divided the clergy, although few clerics dared publicly speak out as Khamenei controlled the vital purse-strings. As a result, the clergy's reliance on Khamenei increased, but the largest shift was that both Khamenei and the clergy became completely dependent on the IRGC to maintain and enforce their control. Iran was effectively transformed into [a praetorian state](#), a military-led dictatorship with a clerical façade. While the system increasingly relied on the IRGC for survival, Khamenei retained singular authority as the primary decision-maker. An uneasy leadership triangle emerged among the Supreme Leader, IRGC, and clergy that became increasingly insular and hardline over the ensuing years to ensure its continued survival.

Ahmadinejad's Fall from Khamenei's Favor

Ironically, while Khamenei and the IRGC executed the 2009 electoral coup to retain their preferred candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, he would fall out of Khamenei's favor during his second term. While deferential, Ahmadinejad cherished his nominal independence from Khamenei, as his political brand was that of a populist representative of the people. Although he was the beneficiary of the IRGC's brutality to keep him in power, Ahmadinejad was not keen to become the face of the regime's repression and sought [behind the scenes](#) to rein in the IRGC's excesses.

As a result, tensions emerged between Khamenei, the IRGC, and the principlist establishment politicians on one side and Ahmadinejad and his inner circle on the other. Ahmadinejad's closest advisor was a controversial figure named Esfandiar Mashaei, who irked Khamenei and the clerical establishment for his heterodox views. Namely, Mashaei stressed nationalism over pan-Islamic ideals regarding the Islamic Revolution, making [statements](#) such as "Without Iran, Islam would be lost. If we want to present the truth of Islam to the world, we should raise the Iranian flag." He was also fanatically obsessed with messianism and the idea of the return of the *mahdi*, a theme that also came to dominate Ahmadinejad's

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ideology. This was seen as antithetical to the Iranian regime system, as it diminished the clergy's and Supreme Leader's importance in governance. Principlist clerics, most notably Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, who was Ahmadinejad's spiritual mentor, bristled at Mashaei's encroachment into religious affairs, labeling his views as heretical and apostasy, and cautioned Ahmadinejad from aligning too closely with them. Conservative critics labeled Ahmadinejad and Mashaei as propagating a "deviant current," which posed a grave threat to the clerical-led *velayat-e faqih* order as the Green Movement.

Following the June 2009 election, Ahmadinejad appointed Mashaei as his first vice president, angering clerics and principlist politicians and causing dissension within his cabinet. A week later, following much rancor, Khamenei intervened and overruled his appointment, the first major sign of friction between the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad deferred to Khamenei but rebelled to the extent possible by appointing Mashaei as his chief of staff. This row touched off a [year-long struggle](#) between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad over the makeup of his cabinet. Khamenei warily gave Ahmadinejad leeway to appoint his preferred picks for ministries such as culture, the interior, and foreign affairs. However, the two struggled over the head of the Intelligence Ministry.

After Khamenei overruled Mashaei's appointment as vice president, Ahmadinejad rebelled by [sacking](#) the Intelligence Minister, [Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei](#), a Khamenei loyalist, in a humiliating fashion. Justifying the firing by criticizing the Intelligence Ministry's preparedness in anticipating the strength of the opposition to the rigged election, Ahmadinejad sought to place someone completely loyal to him in the role, but lacking the full power to do so, settled instead for [Heydar Moslehi](#), a cleric close to the [Office of the Supreme Leader](#) who shared Ahmadinejad's hardline ideological predilections but was loyal to Khamenei above all. The appointment of the like-minded Moslehi assuaged the power-hungry Ahmadinejad for the time being, but he still coveted a loyalist at the ministry's helm, which controlled personnel files on all the major political figures in the country.

The appointment of Moslehi, a former IRGC officer, symbolized the growing power of the IRGC relative to civilian institutions that accelerated after the 2009 election. Ahmadinejad also purged several vice ministers from the Intelligence Ministry who had served as career intelligence officials, replacing them with more hardline or IRGC-connected individuals. These moves served to chip away at barriers erected to preserve the independence of Iran's civilian intelligence services to recast the ministry in the IRGC's image. Up to that point, the upper echelons of the ministry had accommodated moderate and reformist viewpoints, but there was now hardline ideological conformity up and down the ministry's leadership.

With Khamenei increasingly reliant on the IRGC for his political survival, he upgraded the IRGC's intelligence units in the aftermath of the 2009 election from a ["directorate" to an "organization,"](#) giving the IRGC itself more power in Iran's intelligence community. The 1983 Law on Intelligence created the Intelligence Ministry specifically prohibited the IRGC from running an intelligence "organization." Ayatollah Khomeini and his backers at the time, including Khamenei, believed strongly that the elected government should have the dominant role in the intelligence arena and that military outfits such as the IRGC should only have intelligence capabilities in line with military exigencies. The creation of the IRGC intelligence organization gave the IRGC expansive new powers and surveillance capabilities, further entrenching its influence within the Iranian system. Khamenei installed his enforcer, [Hossein Taeb](#), a figure personally close to Khamenei, and his son [Mojtaba](#), infamous for his brutality in suppressing the

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Green Movement protests, at the organization's helm. During Ahmadinejad's second term, the increasingly ruthless and empowered IRGC continued to see expanded budgets and encroached further into all facets of Iran's domestic and international affairs.

Although he was indebted to Khamenei and the IRGC for his continued political survival, Ahmadinejad craved power in his own right and increasingly asserted an independent streak during his second term to build his independent financial clout and patronage networks. However, this could not be done without chipping away at the stranglehold Khamenei, the bonyads, and the IRGC had over the economy. Against the objections of hardliners in the *majles* and unelected echelons of the government, Ahmadinejad sought to [create private banks](#) outside the influence of the IRGC and the *bonyads*. The creation of these banks funded the rise of previously unavailable affiliate companies, real estate investment deals, and import-export opportunities, creating a sphere of influence for Mashaei and Ahmadinejad.

Opening the door to private banks led to the emergence of a corruption scandal that exacerbated tensions between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, although the Supreme Leader emerged on top. Mashaei used his political pull to help an ally of his, Amir Mansoor Khosravi, obtain a license to own and operate a private bank. It later emerged that Khosravi [used forged documents](#) to secure roughly \$2.6 billion in loans from Iranian state-run banks.

Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi [brought the banking scandal to light](#), which prompted Ahmadinejad to seek his ouster in April 2011. Ahmadinejad's ire with Moslehi was also linked to the minister's support for an investigation into the heretical, messianic ideology of Mashaei and other allies of the president. Khamenei had publicly continued to back Ahmadinejad despite his increasing efforts to assert his independence, seeing daylight between himself and the president for whom he ruthlessly shed blood as destabilizing to the Islamic Republic. In this case, however, he [intervened forcefully](#) to reinstate Moslehi, seeing control of the Intelligence Ministry as too valuable an asset to give ground on. Ahmadinejad saw the Moslehi affair as an opportunity to wrest away some of the powers of the Supreme Leader for himself and responded by boycotting cabinet meetings and all state functions for 11 days and threatening to resign if Moslehi's firing was not reinstated. Conservative politicians and clerics, including Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, came down on Khamenei's side, warning Ahmadinejad that his defiance of the Supreme Leader was [equivalent to apostasy](#), a capital offense in Iran.

The Moslehi affair weakened Ahmadinejad, further isolating him from the majority of principlists in the unelected and elected echelons of governance and the IRGC. Realizing that he had overplayed his hand and was now in a weakened position, Ahmadinejad resumed the duties of the presidency and acquiesced to Moslehi's reinstatement following [the receipt of threatening messages](#) from Khamenei. Ahmadinejad also reaffirmed his loyalty to Khamenei, claiming that his "[entire life has been dedicated to velayat](#)" and that enemies were seeking to portray his absence as evidence of a rift for propaganda purposes.

Khamenei was satisfied for the time being that Ahmadinejad had been returned to his subordinate role. However, in May 2011, he fired another shot across his bow, as Mashaei and 24 other Ahmadinejad aides and confidantes were [arrested and charged](#) with sorcery and disobeying the leader, akin to

apostasy. Several months after these developments, in October 2011, conservative opponents of Ahmadinejad within the *majles* sensed blood in the water. They called upon the commission investigating the banking scandal centered on Khosavri's fraudulent loan to expand the probe into whether Ahmadinejad, Mashaei, or other members of the president's cabinet and inner circle played a role. Despite the growing friction between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, the Supreme Leader felt that exposing the corruption of this magnitude would harm the interests of the Islamic Republic and outweigh the opportunity to permanently neuter Ahmadinejad's political fortunes. Khamenei [intoned](#), "an atmosphere of calm is needed in order for this case to be investigated," an implicit signal that led the hardline politicians to back off their calls to include Ahmadinejad in the investigation.

Khamenei's gambit to allow a weakened Ahmadinejad to finish out his second term proved effective in terms of ending Ahmadinejad's political career while allowing Khamenei to save face over his earlier decision to employ brutal tactics to keep Ahmadinejad in power. However, both men emerged from this period scathed. Khamenei's religious and political legitimacy had been challenged unprecedentedly due to the suppression of the Green Movement, and the Islamic Republic's international image received a black eye. Khamenei thought that a subservient ideological hardliner in the presidency would help enact his agenda, thereby giving a democratic veneer to what was effectively the Supreme Leader's singular rule. However, his plan went awry due to Ahmadinejad's ambition for power and desire to chart an independent path, and he came to launch challenges to Khamenei's authority from his right flank.

Ahmadinejad remained defiant until the end of his term, although he was effectively a lame duck following the March 2012 *majles* elections. With reformists largely opting to boycott the elections in response to the suppression of the Green Movement and the Guardian Council disqualifying many reformist candidates, the elections were essentially a contest to settle the intra-conservative factional dispute between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad loyalists. Ahmadinejad's camp [lost handily](#), while more mainstream conservatives and principlists expressly loyal to the Supreme Leader won the lion's share of seats.

The results of the *majles* election revealed the true extent of Ahmadinejad's isolation. The outgoing *majles* considered impeaching Ahmadinejad and summoned him for questioning for his poor handling of the economy and disrespecting Khamenei, particularly his obstinacy during the Moslehi affair. The session was the first time a president had been called before *majles* in this fashion and was considered a humiliation for Ahmadinejad. However, the president responded to the parliamentarians' entreaties with mocking and disdain. Still, the threat of impeachment loomed over him for the remainder of his term, and he stayed in line and did not challenge Khamenei's authority further.

The previously ascendant Ahmadinejad hoped to use his popularity to propel a successor, preferably Mashaei, to the presidency. But due to his weakened position and Mashaei's controversial views, the Guardian Council forbade him from running. Ahmadinejad sought to resurrect his political fortunes and make comebacks during the 2017 and 2021 presidential election cycles, but the Guardian Council, acting at Khamenei's behest, vetoed his candidacy. Khamenei thus emerged from this period triumphing over challenges to his authority from Mousavi, Karroubi, and Rafsanjani on the left and Ahmadinejad on the right. Still, the turmoil of the period led to a change in course for the Islamic Republic, as Khamenei saw fit to abandon the in-your-face bravado of the Ahmadinejad period with a feint toward moderation, all

while keeping the Islamic Republic's penchant for human rights abuses and regional destabilization in place.

Rouhani Presidency

On the campaign trail in 2013, [Hassan Rouhani](#) advocated for a less confrontational approach to the West, leading some Western [media](#) outlets to hail him as a harbinger of moderation in the Islamic Republic. His message also appealed to the politically moderate segment of the Iranian population, who wished to see sanctions lifted to allow for trade and foreign investment. These voters also responded favorably to promises to alleviate the repression of the state's security apparatus. He thus had the potential to satisfy a yearning for new executive leadership after eight years of Ahmadinejad's anti-Western policies.

Of the more than 680 people registered to run in the 2013 presidential election, the Guardian Council only [permitted](#) eight to enter the contest. Rafsanjani sought to run in the election, but he was portrayed as a potential collaborator with hostile powers in hardline media outlets, and the Guardian Council disqualified him. In a common refrain used to undermine reformists, the Kayhan newspaper, whose director is appointed by Khamenei, ran an editorial that read, "A divine and serious responsibility rests on the shoulders of the Guardian Council. It is to rescue Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani from a dangerous bait set for him by foreign enemies and their domestic associates." The newspaper thus resorted to the conspiratorial thinking that colors the Supreme Leader's suspicion of and opposition to the West, indicating how Rafsanjani had not returned to favor with Khamenei and his conservative supporters. The former hardline nuclear negotiator [Saeed Jalili](#), then-Mayor of Tehran [Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf](#), and former secretary of the SNSC [Hassan Rouhani](#) emerged as the top contenders.

Rouhani provided some insurance against a public backlash against electoral manipulation as a conservative cleric running as a centrist pragmatist. He was initially an underdog candidate, whom the conservative-dominated Guardian Council would not have permitted to stand for election had the Supreme Leader viewed him as challenging his rule. Although the Supreme Leader followed his practice of refraining from explicitly endorsing any candidate, it was clear that Jalili, who had in the past proven his intransigence at the negotiating table over Iran's nuclear program, would best fit Khamenei's preference for steadfastness vis-à-vis Western demands.

More than 37 million people out of 50 million eligible voters cast a ballot, [representing](#) almost 73 percent voter turnout. Again hoping the Islamic Republic would chart a new course, moderates rallied around Rouhani, partly because of endorsements from heavyweights Rafsanjani and Khatami, culminating in him [winning](#) 50.71 percent of the vote and thus avoiding a run-off election. The E3 made overtures to the new president, expressing their hopes that Iran would negotiate a settlement to its nuclear program and moderate its behavior. The Obama Administration, too, viewed Rouhani's victory as a potential diplomatic opening.

Rouhani's Diplomatic Initiative

Khamenei long opposed negotiating with Western powers, but he allowed Rouhani to pursue his foreign policy proposal of warmer ties with the West, partly because international sanctions against his regime had ravaged the country's economy. Khamenei hedged and warned against trusting the United States, while at the same time lending tacit approval to the effort. A growing international consensus against Iran's nuclear program also emerged and included China and Russia, meaning that Iran would have been totally isolated had it decided to continue advancing toward building nuclear weapons.

Rouhani's preference for détente inflamed factional disputes inside Iran over the direction of the Islamic Republic. Reformists emphasized a pragmatic approach to the West, while hardline conservatives saw concessions as a sacrifice on the founding principles of the revolution. The factions agreed Khomeini's ideology should remain the guiding ethos of the Islamic Republic's policies, as dissenting opinions held by moderates, seculars, and liberals had for decades been systematically repressed. However, they differed over whether and to what extent it should be adapted within a changing geopolitical context. Cautious and ever-suspicious, Khamenei did not take an unambiguous public position on the deal, allowing him to disclaim responsibility for the agreement in the future.

The [IRGC](#) pushed back against Rouhani and his supporters' diplomatic outreach. Not trusting the U.S., this power base reportedly sought Russia's assistance to sabotage the negotiations, with the former Quds Force commander, [Qassem Soleimani](#), leading the outreach. On a leaked audiotape, Rouhani's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, also often hailed in the West as a moderate regime insider, [admitted](#) that the Rouhani Administration's ability to implement foreign policy was severely constrained, further corroborating how the Supreme Leader's loyalists in the IRGC dominated the elected state.

Rouhani's diplomatic initiative was a departure from the Supreme Leader's vision, which favored self-sufficiency rather than market integration. To reassure his constituency, Khamenei issued harsh rhetoric after the signing of the Iran Nuclear Deal, formally known as the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#), in July 2015, reaffirming his revolutionary credentials and underscoring how the agreement would not ameliorate fundamental hostility toward the West. Yet, the Obama Administration raised public expectations that the deal would lead to a follow-on deal that would address other areas of Iranian behavior threatening U.S. interests, such as its [ballistic missile program](#), [support for terrorism](#), and [human rights abuses](#). Khamenei foreclosed on that possibility soon after the agreement was signed. In a speech marking the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, Khamenei [said](#), "Whether the deal is approved or disapproved, we will never stop supporting our friends in the region and the people of Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon...Even after this deal, our policy toward the arrogant U.S. will not change. We don't have any negotiations or deal with the U.S. on different issues in the world or the region."

The Supreme Leader conditionally [approved](#) the deal in October 2015, saying it would be rendered void if additional sanctions were imposed on Iran for human rights abuses or terrorism. In approving the deal, Khamenei dropped his maximalist demands, such as the requirement that all sanctions against Iran be lifted before a deal could be reached. Rouhani sold the nuclear deal to the Iranian people, pointing to how it helped bring the country back from the brink of economic isolation, [released](#) more than \$100 billion in frozen assets held abroad to the government, and permitted the future deployment of

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advanced centrifuges that could be used to produce weapons-grade uranium. Then, in early 2016, the Supreme Leader penned an open letter to him in which he suggested it was a good deal, [saying](#), “I express my delight that the resistance of the great nation of Iran against the brutal sanctions, and the endeavors of our nuclear scientists for the progress of the nuclear industry, as well as the indefatigable attempts of the negotiators eventually forced the other side—some of whom are famous for animosity against the Iranian nation—to retreat and lift a part of the bullying sanctions.” This was Khamenei’s fullest endorsement of the deal to date.



(L-R) Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani.
Source: [Wikipedia Commons](#)

Later in the year, however, Khamenei [intensified](#) his anti-American rhetoric and walked back his praise for Rouhani’s negotiating team, again reaffirming his revolutionary credentials as he sought to assuage opposition to the deal stemming from his hardline supporters. In his 26th Nowruz speech in Mashhad, he rejected additional negotiations and compromise, saying, “Why was the Qods Force formed? Why were the Islamic Revolutionary Guards formed? Why are the Islamic Republic’s policies...based on Islam?...What is the Guardian Council’s role in

the society? Why is the Guardian Council authorized to reject bills due to their incompatibility with *sharia*?...This is what I have described several times; this is transformation of the Islamic Republic’s essence. The facade of the Islamic Republic might be preserved, but it becomes empty of its content. This is what the enemy wants.”

This speech effectively made clear that Khamenei would not make additional concessions in these areas in the future. Neither secular democratic reforms of its legal and political systems nor changes in the modus operandi of the IRGC and its Quds Force were open for negotiation. Still, Khamenei’s conservative supporters accused Rouhani of undermining the Islamic Republic’s sovereignty and impeding Iran’s national security objectives, namely pursuing highly-enriched uranium. While officials opposed to Rouhani voiced these concerns, Iran’s [Supreme National Security Council issued](#) a directive to Iran’s [Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance](#) to order press outlets across the country to put a positive spin on the JCPOA for fear that criticism of the deal would create divisions among political officials. The directive generated more uniform support among the populace while it sought to curtail hardline dissent that might have jeopardized the deal’s implementation.

From the outset, it became clear that Tehran had no intention of moderating its behavior in other areas of concern. In fact, Tehran increased its support for its regional terrorist network of proxies and partners, disbursing large sums of money to them out of the windfall that the unfreezing of assets and sanctions relief had guaranteed. For instance, Lebanese Hezbollah’s coffers were flooded with Iranian largesse. The U.S. Department of State [reported](#) in 2018 that Hezbollah received \$700 million from Iran yearly, allowing it to expand its operations, while other actors in the “axis of resistance” continued to

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mount attacks against the U.S. and its partners and allies in the region. The IRGC oversaw the proliferation of advanced weapons systems and production capabilities to its [proxies and partners](#). Additionally, Iran accelerated its [drone](#) and [ballistic missile](#) programs, [violating](#) the spirit and intent of U.N. Resolution 2231, which endorsed the JCPOA and “called upon” Iran to limit the range and payload capacity of its missile test launches.

Amid these signs of ongoing Iranian hostility, the election of U.S. President Donald Trump in November 2016 brought a heightened awareness of the deal’s defects and an adamant insistence that Tehran change its behavior or again be squeezed by a U.S.-led sanctions regime. Moreover, U.S. regional partners and allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, remained staunchly opposed to the deal because it provided resources to the Iranian regime’s hostile activities and would provide cover for a nuclear enrichment program down the road.

Rouhani’s Second Term

The 2017 Iranian presidential elections followed shortly before the U.S. election. During his reelection campaign, Rouhani sought to retain the moderate and reformist vote that he had received four years earlier. So he advocated for fewer restrictions on political and social life. He also promoted an educational reform program, which Khamenei dismissed as not sufficiently Islamic and disposed toward a “[corrupt and destructive Western lifestyle](#).” While domestic reforms were a high priority for many of Rouhani’s more moderate supporters, the election effectively became a referendum on the JCPOA.

To Rouhani and his backers, the deal had achieved its goal of opening the Iranian economy, the benefits accrued to ordinary Iranian citizens, and the stage had been set for more cooperation with the West. However, he could not make further concessions for additional sanctions relief. To conservatives and hardliners aligned with Khamenei, Iran had not received the promised economic benefits, partly because of continued economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic for terrorism, human rights abuses, and other malign behaviors. The more conservative candidate, Ebrahim Raisi, attempted to pull urban middle-class voters into his conservative camp who had not seen benefits from the JCPOA. Raisi [hewed](#) to an anti-corruption campaign, raising doubts about Rouhani’s economic management and ability to assist poor Iranians. He also appealed to the deeply religious segment of the Iranian population, advocating for rigorous adherence to the precepts of Islam by Khomeini and the conservative clergy.

The Iranian presidential election again enjoyed a relatively high voter turn-out compared to previous elections. Rouhani received 56 percent of the approximately 40 million votes cast, suggesting that voters largely approved of Rouhani’s outreach to the West and his Western-oriented cultural policies, notwithstanding that Iran’s economic recovery lagged because of corruption, mismanagement, and lingering U.S. sanctions. However, Rouhani quickly proved incapable of charting a new course for the Islamic Republic of Iran. It soon became clear that his domestic and foreign policy agenda would be obstructed and that he would align more closely with hardliners. In late 2017, a public backlash against Rouhani emerged, as some of his supporters turned against him due to their disillusionment with promised reforms. In December, protests [cropped up](#) in one of Iran’s holiest cities, Mashhad. Initially focused on the economy, the protests spread throughout the country and soon culminated in the most significant threat to regime stability since the 2009 Green Movement, morphing into demands for

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regime-change. Protestors were again outraged and emboldened, chanting “Death to the Dictator,” a reference to the Supreme Leader.

Khamenei and his conservative supporters’ campaign to uphold the core beliefs of the Islamic Revolution dashed the protestors’ hopes for a better standing on the world stage. The IRGC’s leadership, hewing to Khomeini’s belief that the Islamic Republic has a moral and religious obligation to protect Islam against Western incursions and spread its message abroad, was emboldened to expand its operations abroad. In accordance with its [constitutional mandate](#), the IRGC’s top brass also opposed the liberalization of political and social life.

In May 2018, the Trump Administration withdrew from the nuclear deal. It reimposed “[maximum pressure](#)” against the regime to move Tehran to agree to terms that would advance U.S. national security interests. With Rouhani’s first-term signature foreign policy achievement now voided by the U.S., Khamenei further distanced himself from the agreement. In August, he [issued](#) his harshest criticism to date, denouncing the agreement for having “trespassed the redlines that [he] had set” and trusting the “Great Satan” to uphold a bargain. While Iranian officials reached out to European powers, hoping to secure their buy-in to the agreement despite the Trump Administration’s withdrawal, Khamenei [hinted](#) later that month that his country was prepared to abandon its obligations under the nuclear deal.

“The Second Phase of the Revolution”

The Supreme Leader turned his sights on preserving the radical ideological origins of the revolution along with his legacy. On the anniversary of the Islamic Republic’s founding, in February 2019, Khamenei [laid out](#) his vision in a manifesto titled the “Second Phase of the Revolution,” focusing on the economy in the context of U.S. sanctions rather than cultural issues. He called on the youth to resist the U.S.’s imperialist designs against Iran, insisting that the only option for economic well-being was to attain self-sufficiency by bolstering domestic production and technical expertise.

The document read, “The solution to these [economic] problems lies in the strong, responsible and lively implementation of the policies delineated by the Economy of Resistance... Assuming that economic problems are merely the result of sanctions, and sanctions are because of resistance against imperialism and not submitting to the enemy, so the solution is to kneel before the enemy and kiss the wolf’s paw is an unforgivable mistake. This [is] completely false analysis.” Khamenei thus clarified that it was incumbent upon all Iranian citizens to participate in the struggle against the enemy because the alternative of compromise would diminish the foundations of the revolution and lead to the subordination of the Iranian people to Western powers.

The next month saw the [installation](#) of hardline conservative Ebrahim Raisi as chief of the judiciary. His appointment portended intensified domestic repression designed to quell any potential uprising of discontent with the regime. Rouhani, who had hemorrhaged much of his moderate constituents’ enthusiasm, fell back on his conservative roots and stood behind the regime’s foreign adventurism and domestic repression. His hardline credentials were brought into sharper relief after the U.S. [designated](#) the IRGC as a terrorist organization in April 2019. Rouhani’s rhetoric and actions became increasingly inflammatory. He made [threats](#) to accelerate nuclear enrichment; defended Iran’s testing of ballistic missiles in contravention of U.N. Resolution 2231; and voiced his support for terrorism as a tool of

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statecraft. Rouhani's ostensible interest in compromise with the U.S. that had defined his first term rapidly hardened into maximalist demands that the U.S. lift all sanctions before Iran would consider negotiating. Rouhani's ruse of moderation was further exposed in November 2019, when in response to another round of widescale anti-regime protests, the security forces launched a brutal crackdown that would claim the lives of [1,500 people](#) in less than two weeks. Khamenei's order to senior security officials and the president to "do whatever it takes to end [the protests]" was swiftly and brutally carried out.

In February 2020, Iran held parliamentary elections in which the [Guardian Council](#) disqualified record numbers of reformist candidates, including about 80 incumbents, paving the way for the hardliners to consolidate power in parliament. In response to the disqualifications and widespread disillusionment with the elected state, many Iranians refused to vote in the parliamentary elections, [resulting](#) in a turnout of only 42.57 percent. The hardliners, whom the Guardian Council allowed to stand for election, swept into power in parliament. Holding approximately 230 out of 290 seats in the *majles*, the hardliners voted in far-right neoconservative [Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf](#) as speaker of the parliament. [Parliament](#) and the [judiciary](#) thus now belonged to the hardline camp.

The hardliner's ascendance in parliament gave way to calls for Rouhani's impeachment over the failure of the JCPOA, the ailing economy, and ongoing corruption and mismanagement, ensuring that his agenda throughout his remaining time in office would be obstructed. The impact of Covid-19 and U.S. sanctions only increased pressure on the presidency. In July 2020, Khamenei came to Rouhani's defense, [saying](#) on television, "I do strongly believe that administrations should work hard to the very end of their tenure and fulfill their responsibilities." Subsequently, hardline lawmakers [backed off](#) their calls for impeachment.

The next month, Rouhani advocated for a "breakthrough" economic plan to deal with the government's budget deficit, which had increased due to reduced oil revenues, but parliament shot it down. Qalibaf and Raisi [reportedly](#) penned a letter to the Supreme Leader to express their opposition to the proposal, creating gridlock as the two branches of government, now dominated by conservatives, sought to turn the page on Rouhani's more moderate politics. While Khamenei had protected Rouhani against impeachment, his tolerance for Rouhani's more conciliatory approach to the U.S. had run its course. Now, Khamenei turned his sights on engineering the rise of a hardliner for the presidency so that the parliament, the judiciary, and the presidency would each be controlled by loyalists to ensure a smooth succession of the Supreme Leadership, the preservation of his legacy, and the longevity of the Islamic Republic.

Raisi Presidency

When presidential elections were held in June 2021, scores of eligible voters again boycotted, either because they saw that the Guardian Council had intervened to sway the election in favor of the far-right conservative Judiciary Chief [Ebrahim Raisi](#) or because they were disillusioned over the prospects for reform after eight years of Rouhani. Rouhani had disappointed his supporters, many of whom hailed from the urban middle class, as they desired fundamental political and social freedoms that Khamenei would never permit.



(L-R) Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi.
Source: [ISNA](#)

The Guardian Council disqualified even prominent pragmatic conservative candidates, such as former Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani, whose credentials did not sufficiently indicate hardline opposition to the West and commitment to the Supreme Leader. The Guardian Council thereby engineered the election victory of Ebrahim Raisi, a Khamenei protégé and potential successor to the Supreme Leader. Of the 585 figures who sought to run for the presidency, the Guardian Council [permitted](#) seven candidates to stand for election, none of which were reformist or

moderate. Raisi soon emerged as the front-runner, and handily won the election, [receiving](#) 18 million of the 28.9 million ballots cast. A mere 48.8 percent of voters turned out.

The Hardliner's Consolidation of Power

The Guardian Council sacrificed the elected state's legitimacy to bring a hardline conservative to power. Raisi was not handed a popular mandate as Rouhani had been, and thus his primary focus would be satisfying the desires of the Supreme Leader rather than the public at large. Khamenei sought to assuage domestic audiences angered by the Guardian Council's manipulation of the election, [stating](#) that some of the presidential hopefuls had been wrongfully disqualified. However, his goal of consolidating control in the hands of the hardline conservatives had been accomplished. The elected state, now completely aligned with the Supreme Leader, would reverse the limited social gains allowed during the Rouhani Administration and the short-lived period of Western outreach that had culminated in the JCPOA.

Raisi had proven his worth to the Supreme Leader during his tenure as chief of the judiciary, one of the most repressive institutions in the Islamic Republic, and during his involvement in the political assassinations of the late 1980s. He quickly installed a cabinet of like-minded Khamenei loyalists, many from the ranks of the IRGC and [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. for their roles in directing state sponsorship of terrorism and human rights abuses. Khomeini's legacy of aggression abroad and repression at home, though never effectively dented by the reformist and centrist presidents of the past, would come into sharper relief now that Khamenei's preferred candidate had been installed at the head of the elected state.

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More rigorous enforcement of Sharia law was soon adopted, setting the stage for renewed protests. Early in his administration, Raisi [issued an order](#) for strengthening enforcement of the mandatory hijab, a pillar of the Islamic Republic instituted by Khomeini in the early years of the revolution. With the backing of the Supreme Leader but without popular legitimacy, his administration has governed with an iron fist, rather than accommodating popular demands. Raisi has presided over a record number of [executions](#) targeting religious and ethnic minorities, those breaking religious law, and those convicted of minor legal offenses. Additionally, his government has worked with the judiciary, the Intelligence Ministry, and the IRGC to crack down on opposition networks within and outside Iran's territorial borders.

The Raisi Administration also oversaw a purge of left-leaning and Western-oriented professors in the university system, an initiative one Western political analyst called the "[third cultural revolution](#)." Students and teachers were expelled and fired for their differences of opinion vis-à-vis the revolutionary state and its founding Khomeinist principles. Soon after taking office, Raisi withdrew a bill sponsored by his predecessor that required universities to admit students based on their educational credentials rather than their religious affiliation. Raisi's educational policy mirrored Khamenei's goal of Islamizing the university system, traditionally the locus of anti-regime student activism.

On the national security front, Iran would rapidly advance its nuclear program to extract concessions from the West while Iranian negotiators stonewalled negotiations to revive the JCPOA. The Biden Administration sought to convey optimism that the accord would be revived and has to date, resisted officially terminating the negotiations after the Islamic Republic refused on two occasions to accept terms for a return to mutual JCPOA compliance and ending its human rights abuses and shipments of drones to Russia for use against Ukraine.

The Islamic Republic turned to maximalist demands that were difficult or impossible for the Biden Administration to grant. Iran's negotiating team has swung between demands for additional sanctions relief in exchange for the same limited timeframe of restrictions on its nuclear program, the [delisting](#) of the IRGC as a terrorist group, [conditioning](#) the revival of the JCPOA on the closure of outstanding International Atomic Energy Agency investigations; and a guarantee that no future U.S. administration could withdraw from the deal. The demand for a binding treaty was especially untenable, given that it would have to be ratified by the U.S. Senate, a body that probably would have rejected the original JCPOA had it been presented for a vote.

From the beginning of the Raisi Administration, the Supreme Leader had signaled his non-interest in negotiations with the West. Before Raisi was sworn in as president in late July 2021, Khamenei set the tone for a more adversarial approach to the West, blaming the "enemy" for making demands beyond the original deal's scope. He [said](#), "By putting this sentence, [U.S. negotiators] want to provide an excuse for their further interventions on the principle of the deal and missile program and regional issues... If Iran refuses to discuss them, they will say that you have violated the agreement and the agreement is over." Still, Khamenei's comments had the intended effect of prolonging the negotiations. At the same time, his regime continued to make strides toward [accumulating](#) a stockpile of uranium enriched to 60 percent, far beyond the concentration required for civilian purposes and putting it within striking distance of weapons-grade uranium. Although Khamenei has long denied on paper that his regime is

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seeking a nuclear weapon, calling such a decision forbidden by Islamic law, the only remaining step to nuclear breakout is his political will.

A year after rejecting negotiations with the U.S., in July 2022, Khamenei welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin to Tehran. This was Putin's first trip outside the former Soviet Union since his February 24, 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which is significant because it showed Moscow's priorities. At the same time, Tehran was deprioritizing its relations with the West. At this meeting, Khamenei offered his fullest endorsement of the Ukrainian invasion to date, [saying](#), "War is a violent and difficult issue, and the Islamic Republic is in no way happy that civilians get caught up in it, but concerning Ukraine, had you [Russia] not taken the initiative, the other side [NATO] would have taken the initiative and caused the war."

Khamenei views a post-U.S.-led world order as consistent with Iran's interests, so he moved to [shore up ties in the East](#). However, this trajectory would break with Khomeini's foreign policy preference of neutrality. In November 2022, Khamenei [tweeted](#), "Today, Western powers are gradually losing their political, scientific, cultural, and economic dominance, and these will be transferred from the West to Asia in the new world order. Asia will become the center of science and economy, and also the political and military power of the world." Although Khamenei had already [conveyed](#) his preference in 2018 after the U.S. withdrew from the nuclear deal, President Raisi's rise cemented Khamenei's favored geopolitical re-alignment. Under Raisi, the Islamic Republic has reinvigorated its antagonism toward the West via its destabilizing activities in the Middle East and its supply of lethal aid to Russia for use in Ukraine.

In addition to the ongoing brutal suppression of the "Women, Life, Freedom" protests enveloping Iran since September 2022, these activities make a new agreement between Iran and Western powers politically difficult. However, reports indicate that the negotiations may have found new momentum. Days after the U.S. and Iranian officials [denied](#) the reports, saying that they were not nearing an interim deal, the Supreme Leader [gave a speech](#) in which he said, "there is nothing wrong with the agreement [with the West], but the infrastructure of our nuclear industry should not be touched." The speech is consistent with his strategy to prolong the negotiations by rhetorically leaving the door open for a new arrangement, while at the same time protecting himself and the Office of the Supreme Leader by deemphasizing the negotiations. In 2014, the last time he spoke before the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), he [said](#) effectively the same thing: negotiations should continue along with ostensible cooperation with the IAEA, but Iran's nuclear achievements should not be touched. A new arrangement in which Iran receives sanctions relief, perhaps in exchange for freezing its nuclear advances, would legitimize its malign behaviors, which it has no intention to moderate or reform. Moreover, it would hand a lifeline to the regime, which has been facing a vigorous opposition movement led by women and youth over the past several months.

Having exclusive control of the elected state, conservatives will absorb all accountability for political and social restrictions, the moribund economy, corruption and mismanagement, and deteriorating relations with the West. The Iranian people are increasingly venting their anger over the unreformable defects of the Iranian system and against the Supreme Leader himself.

Conclusion

Khamenei has relied on loyalists in the Guardian Council to manipulate the candidate field to ensure that no official with the potential to challenge him and the course he has charted for the Islamic Republic can come to power through elections. Rouhani, while purporting to break with the anti-Western extremism of his predecessor, Ahmadinejad, stayed true to his roots as a conservative cleric committed to the revolutionary system of government. The cleric was permitted to stand for election twice because of this loyalty. He made piecemeal concessions in the nuclear negotiations amid mounting international pressures, but the agreement produced with the P5+1 did not alter the course of the Islamic Republic.

The Supreme Leader, while initially showing signs of support for the agreement and later distancing himself from it, consistently rejected the prospects of additional concessions and has shown no interest in rejoining the accord, particularly as he prioritizes relations with the East. The fundamental hostility which had defined U.S.-Iranian relations since the founding of the Islamic Republic remained firmly rooted in Iran's leadership before, during, and after the JCPOA took effect. Iran's brutal [suppression](#) of recurrent domestic anti-regime protest movements, its [materiel support](#) for Russia's war in Ukraine, and its rapid acceleration of the nuclear program have made prospects for mutual reentry into the JCPOA dimmer than ever. Still, the Biden Administration continues to pursue diplomacy even if it is not geared toward reviving the 2015 version of the JCPOA.

As Supreme Leader, Khamenei has sought to preserve the foundations of the Islamic Revolution and secure his legacy. His experiments with more moderate and pragmatic officials in the elected state were never a reflection of his preferences for a more open society, but rather a response, however, limited, to the demands of the Iranian people, which are evermore at odds with the founding principles and values of the Iranian Revolution. Nearing the end of his career, all levers of power, from the Guardian Council to state-run media enterprises and economic foundations, have deliberately been transferred to hardliners to ensure a smooth Supreme Leadership transition and the avoidance of a legitimacy crisis, which is more likely if there are rifts among the political elite. At 84, Khamenei has had cancer and is rumored to have suffered a [relapse](#). Given his age, it is a distinct possibility that Khamenei will pass away during the presidential tenure of Raisi, especially if Raisi is reelected to a second term, which has been the case for every president under Khamenei's Supreme Leadership.

Khamenei's political aspiration has been geared toward purging opposition figures who prefer more secular policies and who favor empowering the elected state. His office operates as the primary mechanism for coordinating a continuing revolutionary struggle against any and all pressures directed at the regime's ideological underpinning: Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*.