

Report

Who Will Succeed Khamenei and How?

*Dr. Fatima AlSmadi**





[ALJAZEERA]

Abstract

This report reviews expected scenarios post-Supreme Leader Ayatullah Ali Khamenei and provides a list of the most prominent candidates which could succeed him, as well as their weaknesses and strengths. The report argues there is no single scenario of who will take his place and how the transition will occur. Rather, this will be determined by the political forces and institutions that have the most impact at this level, foremost of them the Council of Experts and religious authorities in Qom. Furthermore, the role of the Revolutionary Guard cannot be overlooked, for it has become an influential player in Iran's political, economic, security and military spheres.

The report concludes there are several expected scenarios. There could be a smooth transition of power. Another scenario is the Supreme Leader position evolves into a post with little or questionable authority. A third scenario is that the Revolutionary Guard further tightens its grip to bridge the large scale of disagreements in Iran today. Authorities in Qom have differing opinions about this scenario, but the reality is that political life in Iran has declined compared to the first decade after the revolution, giving the Guard growing influence. It is important to note the Council of Experts is controlled by conservatives and is constitutionally charged with appointing the Supreme Leader, giving an idea of the type of leader they will appoint.

Introduction

There are many indicators today that make the question of who will succeed the Supreme Leader, Ayatullah Ali Khamenei, relevant. Recent months have seen numerous reports about his deteriorating health conditions, the Islamic Republic made no secret of the surgery he underwent and the Supreme Leader has not been seen performing his usual exercise, mountain climbing, in quite a while. Furthermore, rumours of his death recently circulated on Israeli media, prompting Iranian news agencies to broadcast a recording of Khamenei giving a speech on the environment.(1)

The question of who will succeed Khamenei is not new: it came up both in and out of Iran several years ago, but today, the question has become far more urgent given recent developments relating to the Islamic Republic on both domestic and foreign levels. This report examines possible scenarios post-Khamenei, listing the likely outcomes and scenarios as well as the likely candidates and their weaknesses and strengths.

The Supreme Leader in the constitution and law

“Wilayat al-Faqih”, or the “Guardianship of the Jurist”, takes a prominent position in the Iranian Constitution.(2) Article V assigns the position of the Supreme Guide of the Iranian Revolution and the leader of Iran, “in the absence of the Mahdi, the guardianship of affairs and leader of the Ummah [nation] in the Islamic Republic of Iran will be in the hands of a just and pious jurist, one who is fully cognisant of his times, courageous, and administratively and managerially capable, in accordance with Article 107”.(3) Article 107 discusses leadership and appoints the Council of Experts, who are elected by the people, to choose the Supreme Leader.

The Supreme Leader’s powers

Article 110 of the Iranian constitution spells out the Supreme Leader’s powers.(4) These provisions explicitly state that the Supreme Guide of the Iranian Revolution (also known as the Supreme Leader) is the first, highest and most influential position in the Islamic Republic. His powers extend across all authorities and to all aspects of the state. He is the supreme commander of the armed forces, responsible for declarations of war and peace, and appoints and deposes the Chief of the Armed Forces, the commander of the Revolutionary Guard and leaders of security institutions.(5)

The Supreme Leader’s powers include appointing and deposing the head of the Constitutional Council and the head of the Radio and Television Corporation. Despite being elected by the people, even the Iranian president is not outside the Supreme Leader’s realm of power – the leader approves his election and has the power to isolate him politically as well as reduce his authority. The example of previous president

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad illustrates this: when he differed with the Supreme Leader on the appointment of intelligence minister, Ahmadinejad was forced to submit to the Supreme Leader's appointment decision or resign.(6)

The Supreme Leader's institution includes preparation and follow-up of all his activities, including meeting, speeches, lectures and statements. He has thousands of representatives in the economic, cultural, political military and security institutions of the state, with a strong presence in universities as well as representatives in a number of countries. The Supreme Leader receives advice from the Expediency Council (Majma' Tashkhis Maslahat al-Netham) on many issues.

The Guide's successor: influential forces

Today, Iran looks more stable than it was when Imam Khomeini died. However, that does not mean that there is a single, widely-accepted scenario in terms of an expected successor nor how power will be transferred. Even the attitude of political forces and institutions who have an impact at this level is not certain. At the forefront of these forces are the Council of Experts and the religious authorities in Qom, as well as the Revolutionary Guard, which has become quite influential in the state's politics, economy, security and military.

There are numerous scenarios. The first is that there will be a smooth transition of power. The second is that the entire future of the Guardianship of the Jurist (Wilayat al-Faqih) will enter a turning point, with its entire position and power called into question. This is especially true with the numerous orientations and positions in Qom and the religious institution's declining power as compared to the first decade after the revolution. Khamenei himself played a role in scaling back the political power of the clergy. On the other hand, the Revolutionary Guard has steadily seen its power grow, with its members working as advisors to the Supreme Leader on economic, political, military and security fields. Today, this circle is called "Rahbari House" in Iran, or the Office of the Supreme Leader. Finally, it is worth noting most of the leading first generation figures of the revolution have been removed from the Iranian political arena.

Scenarios after Khamenei

This section of the report lays out five possibilities should the Supreme Leader leave office.

Scenario one: In this scenario, there would be a smooth transition of power and appointment of a well-known religious authority as the Supreme Leader. This would also indicate a continuation of the "Mullah State" as a ruling theory. Ayatullah Khamenei may

even contribute to choosing his successor in this scenario. It is supported by the conservative mainstream and will mean a large role for religion and the clergy in politics and managing the state's affairs.(7)

This scenario maintains that elections have nothing to do with the selection of the Supreme Leader – in other words, people do not decide or impact the final choice.(8) He is “discovered”, in a sense, by experts in the community, and he becomes apparent through “divine help”. In describing the clergy, Natiq Nouri says, “They are the heirs of the prophets and the infallible Imams who have the responsibility of conveying the religion of God to the people, and that is the reason they entered the world of elections”.(9)

Scenario two: In this scenario, the country would see the end of Wilayat al-Faqih, and the abolition of the Supreme Leader's power. This would result in a serious power vacuum in Iran, particularly because the alternative would be a committee of five well-known men of religion. Many groups are currently criticising the mullah state, arguing that the post ended with Imam Khomeini.(10) In fact, this scenario was put forward after Khomeini died, but Iranian institutions at that time were able to appoint a new leader as well as facilitate his acceptance through constitutional amendments.

The protests in Iran after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election cannot be denied. They manifested themselves in the green movement, and their motto arose from questioning the election results, “Where is my voice?” During that time, the popular phrase, “Death to the dictator”, also became popular, with protestors burning Khomeini's pictures and chanting against Mojtaba Khamenei, a name proposed for the Supreme Leader post during that period.

However, observers should not overlook that there is still great support for the post, and that those who believe it is an efficient system of rule are influential in Iran's political landscape today, holding positions in the Council of Experts, Parliament, the Revolutionary Guard and even in the reform movement.

Scenario three: The third scenario includes constitutional amendments that take a number of the Supreme Leader's powers and give them to the elected president. However, such a scenario would create a controversy with defenders of the mulla state, especially among religious authorities. This will also raise questions about the future and functions of the Council of Experts, perhaps even leading to its dissolution altogether. The Iranian left, known as the reform movement, supports this scenario. This group

gives the republic precedence over religious authority, and proposes a "Delegation of the Jurist" rather than "Guardianship".(11)

Scenario four: This scenario would see a complete abolition of the presidency, instead combining it with the Supreme Leader post. In this way, the Supreme Leader would be popularly elected; however, this collides with clear constitutional provisions on the method of choosing the Leader, as well as with clerics whose opinion is the position can be based solely on designation and not election.

Scenario five: Also known as the "chaos scenario", this would be the result of both a failure to appoint a new leader and the calls to cancel the post altogether. The opposition, at this point, would take advantage of the power vacuum in order to begin an uprising. While this is unlikely because there is no solid opposition in Iran attempting to achieve these goals, the Revolutionary Guard would certainly sweep in to grasp the reins of power, a task they are capable of given their influence and effectiveness on the ground. However, even opponents of the mullah state do not favour this option.

To conclude this section on possible scenarios, it seems that most likely, there will be consensus on a new Supreme Leader, particularly because protests against "Guardianship of the Jurist" were effectively suppressed in 2009. Furthermore, Iranians are discouraged by the outcomes of Arab Spring revolution and will likely opt for reaching consensus so as to preserve mutual interests between all parties involved.

Candidates

Given the above scenarios, the following are the likely candidates for the Supreme Leader position:

Ayatullah Mesbah Yazdi

Mesbah Yazdi, born in the desert city of Yazd in 1935, is seen as a prominent conservative figure. He has studied under both Imam Khomeini and the scholar Tabatabai.(12) Although Yazdi significantly supported Ahmedinejad in his first term, considering him his spiritual father, this support was met with significant criticism and noticeably declined during Ahmedinejad's second term. He has written numerous books, and his views have been opposed by many within the conservative camp. Any support he had from the reformist movement disappeared when he attacked former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, accusing him of seeking "trifle" affairs. Yazdi's relationship with Rafsanjani is not good either, given Yazdi's accusations that Rafsanjani deviated from the revolution's principles.(13) One of Yazdi's significant weaknesses is the strength of his opponents, particularly from religious clerics in Qom.

Ayatullah Shahroudi

Shahroudi holds qualifications giving him a prominent position on the list of possible candidates to succeed Khamenei and is one of the most influential clerics in Iran. He headed the judiciary in 1999 and 2009, has strong relationships with the Supreme Leader, and was born in Najaf in 1948. Shahroudi holds the special distinction of "Marji' Taqleed", one of the highest Shia religious authorities entitling him to hold the position of Supreme Leader.(14) He is currently the vice president of the Council of Experts, as well as head of the committee created by Khamenei for dispute resolution and regulating relations among Iran's three branches of government.

In terms of foreign influence and exporting the revolution, Shahroudi is considered one of the architects of the Iraqi Dawa party, (15) serving as its spiritual father,(16) and played a major role in forming the religiously-motivated opposition to Saddam Hussein. In fact, he was a key link between Muqtada al-Sadr and Imam Khomeini.

Shahroudi faces criticism for the way he dealt with the opposition during his period of judicial authority, with dozens of arrests and trials of green and reform movement members. Furthermore, he faces the obstacle of Iraqi origin and the way he headed the Supreme Council there, raising questions about his Iranian identity and his lack of popular charisma.

Ayatullah Rafsanjani

He was a friend of Khomeini and was Khamenei's friend as well until he was marginalised in the Islamic Republic because of political disagreements with the Supreme Leader. Rafsanjani was a controversial figure early on, but he has left his prints on the Islamic Republic's history. Axes of Rafsanjani's political policies include a free economy, social openness and realism in foreign policy; however, these very things have also been used against him by the opposition. The Revolutionary Guard was very close to the conflict with Rafsanjani, for Ahmedinejad spoke about the mafia-like corruption of Rafsanjani's family during his presidency, (17) as Rafsanjani sought to impede the Guard's economic activity, particularly in the oil industry.

Despite efforts to distance him from the political arena, Rafsanjani remains a contender and efforts to maintain order between the conflicting parties means that choosing him could be a decision which forces itself upon all concerned. However, the reality is that overall, his weaknesses may overpower this strength, particularly given his reputation in the Council of Experts – some members believe he was a leader of "disorder" during the 2009 protests, as well as their aversion to his economic and social ideals.

Mojtaba Khamenei

He is seen as the “strongman” which bridges the support of the Revolutionary Guard, the Basij and a considerable number of clerics, including Ayatullah Mesbah Yazdi. He enjoys little support, however, from the reformist movement and the Rafsanjani camp. WikiLeaks documents revealed that the Supreme Leader had in fact been grooming his son to succeed him.(18) he has been accused of tampering with election results in Ahmedinejad’s election and re-election, and many condemned his role in this regard.(19)

In terms of strengths, he is relatively young (fifty years old) compared to other candidates, and has both economic and security influence. This influence extends outside Iran, including strong relationships with senior Hezbollah leaders and business deals with outside actors.(20) Rigorous religious training raised his ranks in terms of Shia authority; however, he remains absent from the public space and carries the stigma of “inheriting the mullah state”.(21) His supporters also face three key obstacles: the Hawza circles in Qom, Imam Khomeini’s followers and Ayatullah Hashimi Rafsanjani and Hassan Khomeini.(22)

Sadeq Larijani

He is currently the head of the judicial power and has a good chance of succeeding the Supreme Leader. As well as his appropriate age, he has high levels of knowledge in the fields of jurisprudence, religious sciences and contemporary sciences. Larijani enjoys considerable support from the traditional conservative spectrum as well as good relations with authorities. If the conservative factions indeed play the biggest role in selecting the Supreme Leader, he will have a good chance; however, his lineage cannot be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad, and this is a point of weakness that could possibly be bypassed through constitutional means.

Hassan Khomeini

He is the famous grandson of the Islamic Republic’s founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, and son of Ahmad Khomeini and Fatima, the daughter of Ayatullah Tabtabi Soltani. Hassan Khomeini’s wife is the granddaughter of Ayatollah al-Isfahani. Khomeini studied with Qom’s hawza (circle) and continues to be a prominent teacher in Qom.(23) He was clearly opposed to Ahmedinejad’s election and did not attend the appointment ceremony, instead holding a ceremony at his grandfather’s shrine. His actions were especially criticised by youth belonging to Iran’s Hezbollah, who wanted to prevent him from speaking during the anniversary of his grandfather’s death. While Khomeini is not on the same page as the conservatives or the Council of Experts, he maintains a legacy

and has respect from within Iranian society, particularly from the reformists and those who support Rafsanjani.

Hassan Khomeini poses a threat to Mojtaba Khamenei, and Khamenei tried early on to quell his influence and is accused to being a catalyst to the youth protests against Khomeini. Furthermore, while Khamenei enjoys decision-making authority within the Revolutionary Guard, Khomeini's weakness lies in the nature of his relationship with the Guard.

Ayatullah Ahmad Khatami

He was born in Semnan in 1961, is Tehran's Friday Khateeb (orator of the Friday sermon) for the time being, and is highly acceptable to conservative circles as well as the Revolutionary Guard's leaders. Khatami is a member of the Council of Experts and teaches in Qom's Hawza, has led opposition to abolishing the slogan, "Death to America", as well as to the green movement, and took part in the 2009 protests. He has criticised Rafsanjani's demand for censorship of the Supreme Leader (24) and has very strict stances on social issues and compulsory covering for women, which in turn is one of his weaknesses.

Ayatullah Sayed Abu Hassan Mahdavi

Analysts are not talking about Mahdavi very much; however, he is an important name who cannot be ignored. He is an eloquent orator and charismatic cleric within the Guard's circles as well as the Basij, and has strong relationships with leaders. He is the youngest member on the Council of Experts at forty-six years old and is head of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, as well as senior professor at Imam Sadiq University, with a major role of preparing the Islamic Republic's leaders. He is one of Mesbah Yazdi's students and a close friend of Mojtaba Khamenei. Mahdavi also enjoys a special status with Supreme Leaders Ali Khamenei.

Summary

There are a number of conclusions which can be drawn from this report:

- There is no single, widely-accepted scenario concerning the expected successor for the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Iran. Rather, this will be determined by political forces and institutions that have an impact at this level, first and foremost of them the Council of Experts and the religious authority in Qom. The Revolutionary Guard's role must also be taken into consideration given its influence on the political, economic, security and military spheres.
- The scenarios range from a smooth transition of power to prevailing chaos.

- Authorities in Qom have varying attitudes on this issue despite the fact that political life in Iran has declined in comparison to the first decade after the revolution.
- Increasing conservative control of the Council of Experts, constitutionally charged with appointing the Supreme Leader, indicates the nature of the next Leader. However, the influence of figures outside this circle should not be discounted in considering the future Supreme Leader.
- Rafsanjani's strength lies not in his ability to become the Supreme Leader but rather what he is likely to bring to the post. Corruption charges against his family and his conflicts with the Supreme Leader mean that he continues to be deliberately pushed out of the decision-making arena.
- While the name of Mojtaba Khamenei is highlighted as a candidate because he has many strengths, the opposition will be a challenge to his rule given their dislike of the idea of "inheriting the Guardianship of the Jurist".
- All the above-mentioned scenarios do not and cannot ignore the Revolutionary Guard's role in appointing the next Supreme Leader.

Copyright © 2014 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved

**Dr. Fatima AlSmadi is a senior researcher at AlJazeera Centre for Studies specialising in Iranian affairs.*

References

1. Manototv, "Ayatollah Khamenei Makes a Public Appearance", YouTube video published by Manototv, uploaded 8 March 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZS9mDLIaGY> accessed 9 March 2015.
2. Iranian Foreign Ministry, Iranian Constitution, can be accessed at: <http://www.ar.mfa.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=2&pageid=142> .
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Karim Sadjadpour, "Understanding Imam Khamenei: Vision of the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution" [Arabic], Carnegie Institution for International Peace, 2008, <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/reading.pdf> , accessed 10 March 2015.
6. M. Mahtab Alam Rizvi, "Ahmadinejad on the Ropes", The Diplomat, 29 June 2011, <http://thediplomat.com/2011/06/ahmadinejad-on-the-ropes/> .
7. Fatima AlSmadi, Political Trends in Iran, (Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012) 340.
8. Hajjat Murtaji, Political Wings in Iran Today [Farsi], (Tehran: Naqsh Nakkar) 8.
9. Resalat newspaper, 17 March 1996, 2
10. AlSmadi, 2012.
11. Ibid.
12. Curriculum Vitae, official website of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, <http://mesbahyazdi.org/arabic/?biography/index.htm>, accessed 10 March 2015.
13. Author interview with journalist Fred Madrasi (specializing in Hawza affairs), Tehran, July 2013.
14. Ansaar, "Grand Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi Prints His Scientific Message and Faces Censorship" [Arabic], Ansaar, 25 September 2010, <http://www.al-ansaar.net/main/pages/news.php?nid=4259> , accessed 10 March 2015.
15. "Open Dialogue with His Eminence Sheikh Talib Sangaree on Mr. Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi's Authority"[Arabic], Dawa Party Facebook page, 26 August 2012, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=374376239300617&id=134705613267682 , accessed 10 March 2015.

16. Shia-Online, "Ayatollah Shahroudi Becomes the Spiritual Father of the Dawa Party" [Persian], Shia-Online, 20 December 2011, <http://shia-online.ir/article.asp?id=21502> , accessed 7 March 2015.
17. In his election campaign in 2005, Ahmadinejad promised to clean up the oil ministry of "family mafias", and when he won the presidency, Mehdi Hashemi Rafsanjani was quick submit his resignation from the Ministry of Oil. Observers in Iran say the Rajsanjani family's influence was at its lowest with the arrival of Ahmadinejad to power. See BBC Persian, 7August 2005, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/business/story/2005/08/050807_ra-oil-hashemi.shtml .
18. The Telegraph, "Iran: Expat Source's Information and Views on Mojtaba Khamenei, and This Source's Pitch for USG Funds", Passed to the Telegraph by WikiLeaks 4 February 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/wikileaks-files/london-wikileaks/8304719/IRAN-EXPAT-SOURCES-INFO-RMATION-AND-VIEWS-ON-MOJTABA-KHAMENEI-AND-THIS-SOURCES-PITCH-FOR-USG-FUNDS.html> .
19. One of the slogans shouted by the protestors was, "Die, Mojtaba, You Will Not Get Leadership".
20. Haddad Adel, "Mojtaba Khamenei Did Not Send a Truckload of Gold to Turkey" [Persian], BBC Persian, 12 January 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/01/130112_l45_haddad_mojtaba_khamenei.shtml .
21. Khod Nevis, "All Candidates Succeeding Khamenei" [Farsi], <https://khodnevis.org/article/56402#.VP7j2uH4bz4>.
22. Atallah Mohajerani, "Mr. Hassan Khomeini and His Promising Political Future", Middle East Journal 11530, 23 June 2010, <http://archive.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=575204&issueno=11530#.VP7oJ-H4bz4> .
23. Ibid.
24. Radio Farda, "Ahmad Khatami" [Farsi], Radio Farda, 13 February 2015, <http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f3-khatami-says-reformists-will-fail-in-assembly-experts/26847108.html> , accessed 10 March 2015.