

## The future of Iran after the inevitable succession regarding the position of Supreme Leader

Despite the fact that the head of the Iranian Government is the President chosen in general elections (this is currently Hassan Rouhani, who is perceived as a relatively moderate politician), the actual power in Iran is in the hands of the Supreme Leader (Rahbar). Thus, he dominates a process of creating Iran's foreign, security and defense policies, including in relation to Iran's nuclear program. As well as being able to remove the President from office, the Supreme Leader is also responsible for declaring war and general mobilization, given that he is the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces (Artesh), as well as the Head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Sepah), including special forces units within the Revolutionary Guards, such as the Al-Quds Force, which operates abroad, e.g., in Syria and Iraq. Rahbar is the highest political authority in Iran with responsibility for nominating candidates to key positions in both the civilian and military administrations. Furthermore, he is the supreme religious authority who plays a decisive role in interpreting Islam and determining the impact of religion on national law.

It seems certain that any changes in Supreme Leader will have serious consequences for Iran, its domestic policy (including relations among specific interest groups and politicians), the future of the Islamic Revolution, and Iranian foreign affairs and security policy. Despite the international agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, which was reached between Iran and the P5+1 in Vienna in 2015, Iran could change its current direction and become a closed and confrontational country towards the international community once again, should the successor to the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, be more conservative. However, a less conservative person elected to the role of Supreme Leader might strengthen the current foreign and security policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, ensuring that the government will continue to be controlled by politicians perceived as relative reformists.

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The first Supreme Leader of Iran was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who held this position from 1979 until his death in 1989. At that time, as a result of the political strife, he was succeeded by Ali Khamenei, who had neither the great charisma nor the religious experience of his predecessor. He is currently 77 years old and has been ill for a long time. In 2014, he was hospitalized and underwent major surgery. Given the Supreme Leader's advanced age, there is no doubt that the election of Khamenei's successor is a matter for the near future, even if the information about his cancer (which appears from time to time) is not true. It seems certain that both Khamenei and his circle have been preparing for this scenario since 2014, when Great Ayatollah Ghorbanali Dorri-Najafabadi (who is a member of the Assembly of Experts, which has the right to control, appoint and remove the Supreme Leader) stated that it is necessary to consider succession planning for the current Rahbar. In December 2015, the former President of Iran, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, admitted that potential successors are currently under consideration.

## Potential scenarios

There is no doubt that the inevitable end of the Khamenei era is of great importance for Iran. The succession will bring about a backstage power struggle, which was evident at the beginning of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and, to a lesser extent, after Khomeini's death in 1989. It is worth pointing out that Khamenei has not identified his successor, which could reduce the risk of a struggle for succession; therefore, it is not possible to rule out such a struggle in the near future. The decision from June 2016, when Supreme Leader Khamenei replaced the Chief of the General Staff, seems to be a clear signal that preparations for succession have begun. General Hassan Firouzabadi, considered to be a supporter of Iranian foreign policy under Hassan Rouhani, has been replaced by General Mohammad Bagheri, a former Head of Intelligence and veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, who is perceived as an opponent of Rouhani's policy and important player within the structure of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Therefore, it is worth considering two facts. Firstly, Firouzabadi has been suddenly replaced after holding this position for 27 years. Secondly, his dismissal took place during Ramadan, which was unusual. This could mean that the Supreme Leader is aware of inevitable changes and wants to strengthen Iranian conservatives' position in the case of a temporary lack of leadership, which might lead to social protests and consequently weaken the Islamic Revolution. In other words, the appointment of General Bagheri seems to be an attempt to strengthen the state against potential threats of destabilization.

It is very likely that numerous interest groups and certain individuals will begin a power struggle when Khomeini passes away. Relatively moderate circles gathered around current President, Hassan Rouhani (who is likely to fight for re-election this year), and - when alive - former President (from 1989 to 1997) Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (who passed away in January 2017), have a slight chance of taking advantage of these circumstances. Firstly, the reformists are divided and lack strong and charismatic individuals. Secondly, the Assembly of Experts, which is a collegial body, is dominated by politicians perceived as conservatives

(they currently control 55 out of 88 seats, which guarantees them two thirds of the votes required to elect the Supreme Leader in accordance with their political preferences). Moderate politicians will not be able to push their candidate through, but, even if it happens, the conservatives will probably ignore, discredit or even try to dismiss the new Supreme Leader.

The Iranian Armed Forces, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, will probably play a key role in stabilizing the situation after the Khamenei era comes to an end. Therefore, it is not possible to rule out a scenario in which the Armed Forces will take actual control over the country, with the position of Supreme Leader remaining unfilled. It does not necessarily mean that Iran will become a closed country, since Iranian military officers, including those in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, are rather pragmatic and will look for the legitimacy of their government (both from Iranian society and the international community) in order to maintain power. It seems possible that the military government could be more pragmatic and interested in cooperation than the current one.

The second scenario related to the Armed Forces assumes that the new Supreme Leader would be a weak politician, controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In theory, the Supreme Leader is also the Supreme Commander of this unit; however, the officers of Sepah have become independent and created a 'state within a state' (in terms of military matters, policy and the economy), particularly as the Khamenei era moves closer to its conclusion. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are internally divided, meaning that it will be difficult to find a common attitude towards the Supreme Leader's election. As the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps will not allow for any decrease in their significance, they will fight to strengthen their power, regardless of the final strategy.

Iranian politicians do not rule out the possibility that a could replace the position of the Supreme Leader. One of the greatest supporters of this concept was Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had been repeatedly arguing for this idea in public, receiving widespread criticism from Iranian politicians and military officers for doing so. For example, in December 2015, the Chief of the General Staff, General Firouzabadi, stated that replacing the Supreme Leader's position with a collegial body would mean that "the country will suffer and our unity against the United States, Zionists and the imperial enemies will crumble". While these words reflect the internal rhetoric in Iran, the scenario depicted seems unlikely to happen. Difficulties related to the election of the next Supreme Leader in the period of 'interregnum' could even cause an internal crisis in Iran and, in turn, bloody riots or even a civil war under the darkest conditions (there are certain groups in Iran that want to destabilize the country, including separatist movements). These threats could be exacerbated by foreign powers trying to overthrow the Islamic Republic. It is quite likely that these powers were interfering in the internal affairs of Iran in the past. The following countries have certain interests in destabilizing Iran in order to overthrow its current government: Israel, Saudi Arabia and the USA.

## Conclusions and recommendations

1. Taking into account an inevitable leadership transition in Iran, it is necessary to observe and monitor the internal affairs of this country in order to predict what will happen, as well as respond to any new developments.
2. The election of the Supreme Leader will probably determine the political direction of Iran with regard to its internal policy and foreign affairs in the coming years.
3. The election of the Supreme Leader will be associated with an internal fight among interest and power groups, which are related to religious, secular and military circles.
4. There is a certain group of states interested in taking advantage of the period when Khamenei's death is announced, for example, in order to destroy the Islamic Revolution.
5. It is not certain whether the political transition in Iran will be peaceful. A persistent lack of leadership could cause a deterioration in the internal situation in Iran, including the outbreak of riots.

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