



THE DOSSIER

# Post-Khamenei Iran: The Future of Evolutionary Regime Change

*By Kamran Bokhari*





# Table of Contents

Executive Summary ..... 3

    Key Takeaways ..... 3

    Policy Implications ..... 3

---

Introduction ..... 4

---

Khamenei’s Republic and Intra-Conservative Rifts ..... 6

    Pragmatic Conservatism ..... 6

    The Reformist Challenge ..... 7

    Conservatives Versus Conservatives ..... 8

---

Evolutionary Regime Change: Military Supremacy Over the Clergy ..... 11

    IRGC: From National Security to Political Economy ..... 12

    The Return of the Pragmatic Conservatives ..... 13

    The Nuclear Deal ..... 14

    The IRGC, Constraints, and Artesh ..... 15

    The Decaying of the Republic ..... 16

---

The Rapidly Approaching Post-Khamenei Era ..... 18

---

Policy Implications ..... 19

---

Endnotes ..... 21

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and not an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute.

## COVER PHOTOS:

**(Center)** Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (Iranian Leader Press Office / Anadolu via Getty Images)

**(Top left)** Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, chief of the general staff of the Armed Forces (IRGC) (Sefa Karacan / Anadolu Agency / Getty Images)

**(Top right)** Brig. Gen. Mohammad-Reza Gharaei Ashtiani, minister of defense (Artesh) (Sara Abdollahi / Borna News / ATP Images / Getty Images)

**(Bottom left)** Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Atta Kenare / AFP via Getty Images)

**(Bottom right)** Maj. Gen. Abdolrahim Mousavi, commander-in-chief of the Artesh (Atta Kenare / AFP via Getty Images)

## The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

**Our mission** is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

**Our purpose** is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.





# Post-Khamenei Iran: The Future of Evolutionary Regime Change

*By Kamran Bokhari*

## Executive Summary

At present, international focus is on Iran's increasingly aggressive stance in the Middle East in the wake of its unprecedented direct attack on Israel on April 13. However, while Tehran hurtles toward a potential major war in the region, the situation on its domestic front is headed toward a critical pivot point. Over the past 20 years, Iran's Islamist regime has been experiencing a process of evolutionary regime change. The political establishment's efforts to regain control over the executive and legislative branches of government has had a major unintended consequence in the form of deepening intra-conservative rivalries. A key outcome of this power struggle is the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as the most powerful institution in the country – at the expense of the clerical establishment. These struggles in Tehran are intensifying as the Islamic Republic approaches a key inflection point: the expected passing of the infirm 85-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has been at the helm for 35 years of the regime's 45-year-history. His successor is likely to be far more beholden to the military, which will dominate post-Khamenei Iran.

Unfortunately, these changes will not lead to democratization of the Iranian polity as is the hope of a vast majority of Iranian people, at least not in the foreseeable future; instead, the military will use the republican institutions to establish its supremacy over the state. But this won't be a simple case of the military gaining supremacy over the clergy, given that the Islamic Republic has two parallel military forces: the IRGC and the regular armed forces known as the Artesh. This massive domestic change is taking place as Iran has emerged as the most significant driver of geopolitics in the Middle East and beyond, given its escalating conflict with both Israel and the United

States amid the ongoing war in Gaza. It will serve as a key constraint on Tehran's ability to project power in its strategic environs.<sup>1</sup>

## Key Takeaways

- Post-Khamenei Iran can be expected to gradually shed its hard-line Islamist ideology in the theocratic sense.
- The clergy will likely have to part ways with some of its political power in an effort to retain its religious role in society.
- The military will be the center of gravity of the country's political system, but if the IRGC is to dominate politics, it will have to get buy-in from the regular armed forces.
- The regime's future behavior will be driven by a blend of Iranian nationalism and Islamic identity.

## Policy Implications

- The next U.S. administration will need to be prepared to take advantage of this internal metamorphosis. Washington will need a new strategy to shape the behavior of an Iranian polity in flux – one that takes into account the manner in which the complex internal balance of power in Tehran will likely shift.
- Tehran's foreign policy could become somewhat more pragmatic, but it will continue to aggressively pursue its regional interests and therefore continue to be a challenge for international security, especially as it does not face any capable countervailing forces in the Arab world.
- The evolution of the Islamic republic will likely be similar to that of the People's Republic of China during the 1970s, in that Tehran, even as it becomes less ideological, will remain a strategic quandary for U.S. foreign policy and national security interests.



# Islamic Republic of Iran



## Introduction

Throughout its four-and-a-half-decade existence, the Islamic Republic of Iran has posed a major geopolitical challenge to the United States. Successive U.S. administrations have relied on sanctions as a tool to deal with the radical polity. These sanctions have been effective in imposing constraints upon the Shia Islamist regime, but they have not moderated its behavior. The key reason for this has been that its complex political system was heretofore functional and thus wasn't under any compulsion to alter course. Currently though, the cleric-dominated

regime is at an impasse, with an increasing inability to balance an assertive foreign policy with its domestic political economic compulsions.<sup>2</sup>

For at least a decade and a half, Tehran has been in the throes of *evolutionary regime change*, with the military, dominated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), subordinating the clergy, led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as the driving force in the increasingly factionalized state.<sup>3</sup> The impending succession in light of Khamenei's advanced age and feeble health will be a critical moment in this trajectory. It will gradually result in the replacement of

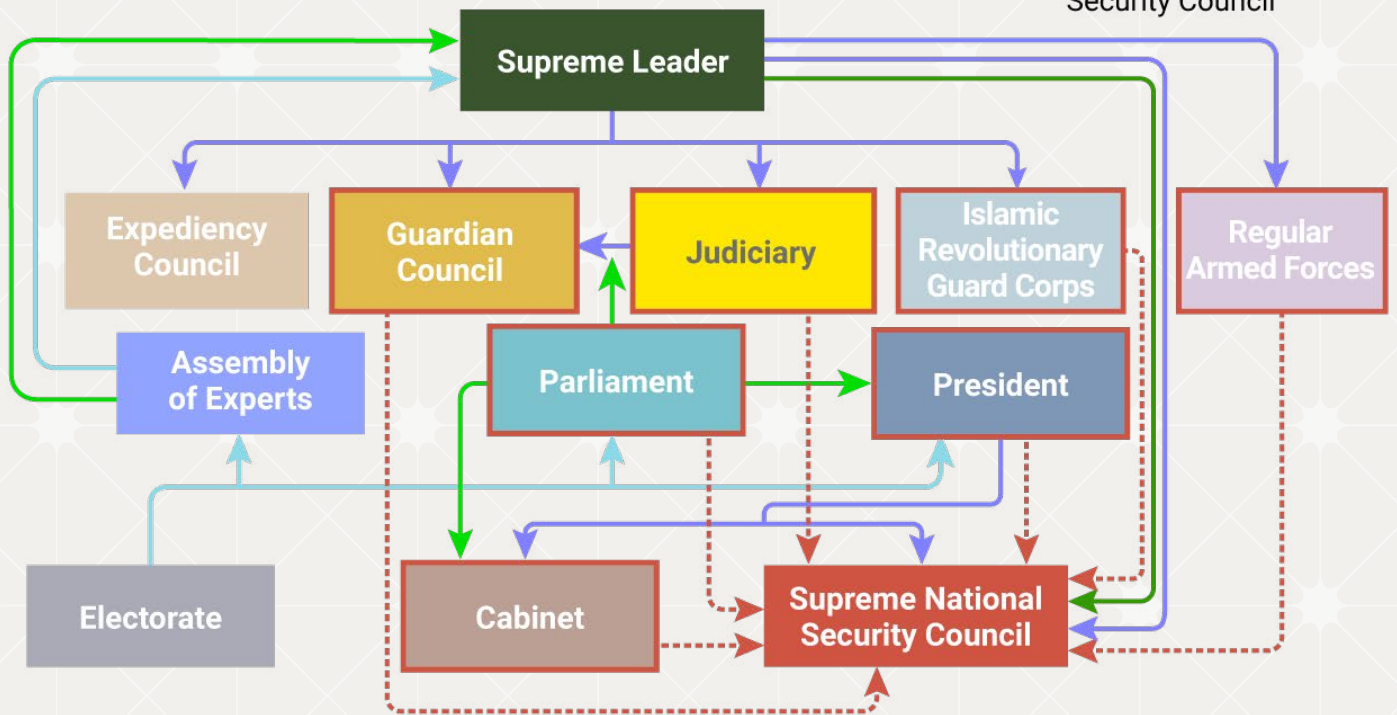


# Iranian Political Power Structure

The Iranian political system is a complex combination of republican, clerical, and security institutions. The following two charts illustrate how leaders in these various state organs are either popularly elected or appointed by the supreme leader, the level of authority of each body, and each body's decision-making powers.

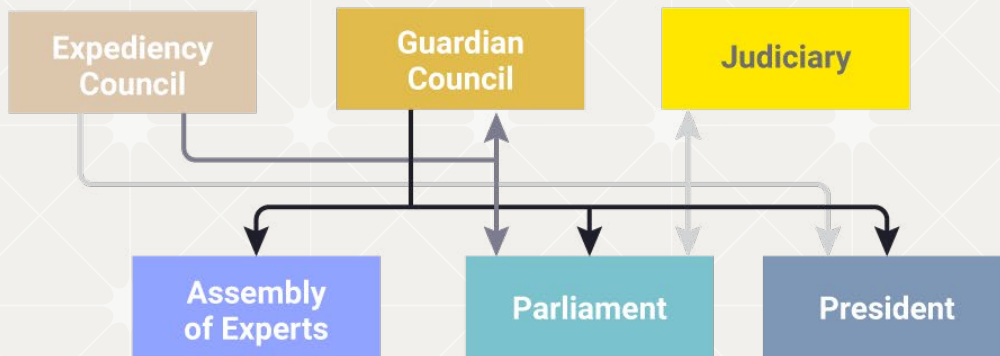
## Power-Sharing Between Clerics, Officers, and Politicians

→ Appoints    → Elects    → Confirms; rejects appointments; impeachment authority    → Approves decisions    → Represented in the Supreme National Security Council



## Clerical Domination

→ Vets candidates; veto power    → Arbitrates between    → Oversight authority



Source: Geopolitical Futures

© 2024, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy



the current Islamist theocratic order with a military-driven and more nationalist regime, which is likely to be selectively pragmatic even as it continues to pursue a radical foreign policy agenda. Washington needs to be prepared for this accelerating regime evolution, which could present opportunities to induce behavioral change in Tehran – both in terms of its foreign and domestic policies.

## **Khamenei's Republic and Intra-Conservative Rifts**

The Islamic republic hardwired internal struggles into its body politic at inception following the 1979 revolution. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the most influential leader of the popular uprising that toppled the monarchy, established a regime that grafted clerical rule upon a Western-style republican model of governance.<sup>4</sup> What emerged was a hybrid polity consisting of a maze of institutions in which clerics had authority over day-to-day governance that was discharged by the executive branch, headed by the president, and a legislature – both popularly elected. Khomeini remained at the helm for about a decade, during which he led efforts to lay the foundations of the Islamic republic while the country was embroiled in a devastating eight-year war with neighboring Iraq that claimed the lives of a million Iranians along with an economic toll in the billions of dollars.

### **Pragmatic Conservatism**

The founder's death in June 1989 marks the only time that the Shia Islamist state has seen a transition from one supreme leader to another. Khamenei, who had served as a two-term president (1981-89), succeeded Khomeini, and in the nearly 35 years since, he has shaped the clerical regime far more than its founder. Over the course of the past three and a half decades Khamenei has left his imprint on the state, particularly through appointments of top clerics, military officers, and politicians. It is no exaggeration to say that Iran is Khamenei's republic.<sup>5</sup>

Khamenei assumed the supreme leadership amid serious tensions between elected politicians in parliament and the Guardian Council, a 12-member body composed of jurists and theologians with the authority to vet candidates for public office and

legislative oversight powers. The Guardian Council's vetoes of legislation approved by parliament, claiming it was against Islamic law, was creating a gridlock in the system. Khomeini's solution was the creation of the Expediency Council in February 1988, which was designed to mediate between the legislature and the Guardian Council.<sup>6</sup>

This was the context in which Khamenei ascended to the apex of the political system. The struggle between its theocratic and republican parts heavily shaped his strategy to manage the Islamic Republic, and ever since, he has been ceaselessly trying to balance between ideological compulsions and pragmatic imperatives.<sup>7</sup> This has been the hallmark of his career, and it has led to miscalculations, which together with unintended consequences have rendered the regime increasingly at odds with itself.<sup>8</sup>

Lacking the clerical stature of his predecessor, Khamenei faced the daunting task of establishing himself as the head of a regime that was a mere 10 years old and that had spent the better part of the decade surviving a disastrous war. He got the job in no small part due to support from then-parliamentary speaker Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who until his death in 2017 was the second-most-influential cleric-turned-politician in the Iranian political system.<sup>9</sup> It took a long while for Khamenei to consolidate himself in the supreme leader position, which itself required institutionalizing. This helped the pragmatic conservative Rafsanjani, who succeeded Khamenei as president, to pursue policies necessary for the country to engage in post-war reconstruction, a period that coincided with the end of the Cold War and the U.S.-led 1991 war against Iran's neighbor and erstwhile nemesis Iraq. It was not until Rafsanjani's second term that Khamenei, ensconced in the role, began to assert himself.

Toward this end, Khamenei leaned heavily on the IRGC. Established three months after the founding of the regime as an ideological security force dedicated to its preservation, it spent the bulk of its first decade engaged in the war with Iraq. The IRGC emerged as a major force during the war in the 1980s and had supplanted the regular armed forces, known as the Artesh, in terms of stature.<sup>10</sup> Its cultivation of Hezbollah in collaboration with the Syrian regime during the



## Iran's Political History Since 1981

**1981-89:** Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's presidency

**1989:** Khamenei becomes supreme leader

**1989-97:** Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (pragmatic conservative)

**1997-2005:** Mohammad Khatami's presidency (reformist)

**1999:** Reformists sweep first ever local elections

**2000:** Reformists sweep parliamentary polls

**2004:** Conservatives regain control of parliament

**2005-13:** Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's presidency (first non-cleric) and IRGC officers dominate Cabinet

**2005:** Intra-conservative feuds begin

**2009:** Green Uprising after claims of fraud in presidential election

**2012:** U.S. imposes most severe round of sanctions

**2013-21:** Hassan Rouhani's presidency (pragmatic conservative)

**2015:** Nuclear agreement

**2018:** U.S. withdraws from nuclear agreement



Protesters demonstrate against Iran's hijab laws in Tehran on Sept. 21, 2022. (AFP via Getty Images)

**2020:** U.S. assassinates IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani

**2021-24:** Ibrahim Raisi's presidency (ultraconservative)

**2022:** Worst protests since regime's founding

**2023:** Hamas' Gaza attack triggers regional conflict

**2024:** Ultraconservatives win Parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections

© 2024, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

Israeli occupation of Lebanon, while still fighting in the war against Iraq, helped it burnish its credentials as a serious military force across the region.

The end of the war with Iraq allowed the IRGC to return to what it was designed to do: play a key role in the consolidation of the republic. Subordinate to the clergy, specifically the supreme leader, the IRGC's rise as a pivotal power center within the political system coincides with Khamenei's efforts to consolidate his own hold over the state.

### The Reformist Challenge

By the time Rafsanjani's second presidential term ended in 1997, Khamenei and the IRGC both had become increasingly powerful. However, that did not

solve the supreme leader's problem of having to deal with a popularly elected president and parliament. Rafsanjani's pragmatic conservative era gave way to the rise of forces further to the left on the Iranian political spectrum.<sup>11</sup> The victory of reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election compounded the problems for Khamenei and the clerical and security establishments dominated by the hard-liners.

The situation became even more acute for the regime when in 1999, reformists won the first-ever local elections held by the Islamic republic, gaining as many 75 percent of the municipal seats in the country. The following year, reformist candidates swept parliamentary polls and won 222 out of the 290 seats in the unicameral legislature. By the time



Khatami secured a second term in 2001, reformists were in control of the presidency, parliament, and the municipalities. This represented an intolerable trend that Khamenei and hard-line conservatives sought to reverse.

From Khamenei's point of view, ever since he became supreme leader, the theocrats had been increasingly losing control of republican institutions in the hybrid system. As the years rolled on, and especially after the 9/11 attacks, Tehran's foreign policy situation was becoming perilous. Already under sanctions for over a generation, Iran came under growing U.S.-led international pressure after the discovery of its nuclear weapons program. More importantly, the struggle with Washington for influence in Iraq in the wake of the 2003 U.S. move to topple Saddam Hussein's regime was intensifying.

Khamenei and his allies felt that the domestic political schism, with reformists in control of the government, would be detrimental to the regime's geopolitical interests because they would be eager to compromise with the United States. The hard-liners' solution to this problem was to engage in pre-electoral engineering via the Guardian Council to facilitate the election of largely conservative candidates in 2004 parliamentary polls.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the Council disqualified over 2,000 reformist candidates, including dozens of incumbent lawmakers.

Disqualifying reformists from running for office by itself was not enough, though. After nearly a decade of overwhelming popular support for reformists, there was a dearth of genuine politicians who were ideologically in sync with the clerical establishment. The duality of the political system as such was that Khamenei could not simply pack the popularly elected institutions with clerics. There was a need for a large body of electables committed to the clerical order to fill the legislature and the Cabinet, which in essence meant ruling via proxies that were not simply going to implement orders from above. Instead, they had their own ideas – more often not sufficiently in line with Khamenei and the clergy – as well as interests, which they sought to pursue.

For nearly 25 years, Iranian presidents had been popularly elected clerics, but they were increasingly

reform minded – as is evident from the two terms each of Rafsanjani and Khatami. Reversing that trend would be difficult given how the public was unlikely to elect a conservative cleric as president unless the system was manipulated to produce the desired outcome. Khamenei and the clerics decided to go for a non-cleric – one who had both a popular support base and who was seemingly loyal to the ideals of the revolution. As a result, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, the mayor of Tehran and a former provincial governor, was elected president in 2005.<sup>13</sup>

### **Conservatives Versus Conservatives**

Ironically, the establishment supported Ahmedinejad against Rafsanjani, whom Khamenei began to see as a threat. The pragmatic ayatollah was seeking a third presidential term to prevent the complete domination of the political system by more right-wing conservatives. To purge the system of reformists and keep pragmatic conservatives at bay, the establishment was willing to accept a president who was not a cleric. The clergy's need for ideologically committed politicians and technocrats also forced them to bring the military increasingly into politics.<sup>14</sup>

The IRGC provided a large pool of such leaders who possessed ideological fealty as well as the experience of statecraft. Several officers and commanders from the Corps entered parliament and dominated Ahmedinejad's Cabinet. This paved the way for the IRGC to further dominate the civilian non-clerical space. A non-cleric becoming president and the entry of IRGC veterans into the executive and legislative branches of government produced an unintended consequence: rivalries among different conservative factions. Having defeated the pragmatic conservatives and their reformist allies, the hard-line camp went through an internal realignment, creating an intra-conservative fault line – creating a new spectrum of pragmatists and ideologues.

Once united in their opposition to the reformists, various conservative factions began to spar with one another. Khamenei's job became much more difficult as he began to contend with rivals within his preferred camp.<sup>15</sup> There had always been differences among different clerical factions competing for the mantle





of conservatism; that struggle became exponentially exacerbated with the entry of non-clerics like Ahmedinejad and a large number of IRGC officers into political office.

The logic behind facilitating Ahmedinejad's rise to the presidency was twofold. First, it was designed to weaken the reformist and the pragmatic conservative

camp, which over the course of four election cycles had emerged as major counterweights to the hard-line clergy. Second, the hope was that, as a non-cleric populist, Ahmedinejad would serve as a counterweight to the public influence of the left-of-center factions and as a result their dominant position in the popularly elected institutions. However, while Khamenei and his allies were able to weaken the more liberal-minded

## Influential Clerics of the Islamic Republic

### Ayatollah Ali Khamenei-line

- **Seyed Hashem Booshehri:** Head of the Association of Teachers of Qum Seminary; Vice Chairman of the Assembly of Experts
- **Seyed Ebrahim Raisi:** President of the Islamic Republic; member of the Presidium of the Assembly of Experts; former head of Judiciary; possible contender for the position of successor to the Supreme Leader
- **Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei:** Current head of the Judiciary; former Minister of Intelligence
- **Sadegh Larijani:** Former head of the Judiciary; Secretary of the Expediency Council; son-in-law of Grand Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani; until the recent Assembly of Experts election which he lost, a possible contender for the position of successor to Supreme Leader
- **Ayatollah Ahmad Janati:** Secretary of the Guardian Council; Chairman of the Assembly of Experts
- **Mohammad Mohammadi Golpaigani:** Chief of Staff of the Supreme Leader
- **Movahedi Kermani:** Head of the Militant Clergy Association
- **Ahmad Khatami:** A member of the Assembly of Experts. One of the six chief clerics of the Guardian Council
- **Mohsen Araki:** Member of the Expediency Council; member of the Presidium of the Assembly of Experts
- **Abass Ka'abi:** Member of the Presidium of the Assembly of Experts; Vice Chairman of the Association of Teachers of Qum Seminary
- **Mohsen Qumi:** Member of the Presidium of the Assembly of Experts; chief liaison of the Supreme Leader with foreign groups and states
- **Abdollah Haji Sadeghi:** Chief representative of the Supreme Leader in IRGC
- **Ali Saidi Shahroodi:** Former chief representative of the Supreme Leader in IRGC; currently head of Ideological-Political Bureaus of the Commander-in-Chief

- **Seyed Esmail Khatib:** Minister of Intelligence
- **Aliakbar Nategh Nouri:** Former Speaker of Majlis; until recently Chief Inspector for the Supreme Leader; active in both the Left and the Right camps
- **Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi**
- **Grand Ayatollah Noori Hamedani**
- **Mojtaba Khamenei:** Son of the Supreme Leader and possible contender for the position of successor to the Supreme Leader
- **Seyed Ahmad Alamolhoda:** Chief Custodian of the Imam Reza Shrine Endowment; father-in-law of president Raisi
- **Hassan Rouhani:** Former president; former secretary of the Expediency Council

### Left of the Supreme Leader-line

- **Mohammad Khatami:** Former president
- **Mehdi Karoubi:** Leader of the Green Movement currently under house arrest; former Speaker of Majlis
- **Seyed Hassan Khomeini:** Grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic; custodian of Imam Khomeini Shrine
- **Seyed Mohammad Mousavi Khoiniha:** General Secretary of the Combative Association of Clerics

### Right of the Supreme Leader-line

- **Seyed Mahmood Nabavian:** Follower of the radical cleric Mesbah Yazdi and the highest vote-getter in the recent parliamentary elections; a likely Speaker of the new Majlis
- **Morteza Agha Tehrani:** Follower of the radical cleric Mesbah Yazdi; head of the radical faction in the current parliament
- **Hamid Rasai:** Second highest vote-getter in the recent parliamentary election; radical clerical activist and publicist
- **Alireza Panahian:** Influential activist and publicist

© 2024, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy



Minister of Intelligence  
Seyed Esmail Khatib  
(Mehr News Agency)



Chairman of the  
Expediency Council Sadegh  
Larijani (Atta Kenare / AFP  
via Getty Images)



Judiciary Chief Gholam-  
Hossein Mohseni-Ejei  
(Morteza Nikoubazl / NurPhoto  
via Getty Images)



Secretary of the Guardian  
Council and Chairman of  
the Assembly of Experts  
Ayatollah Ahmad Janati  
(Atta Kenare / AFP via Getty  
Images)

elements, the process did not lead to the strengthening of the conservatives.

On the contrary, Ahmedinejad's presidency weakened the conservative camp. The sidelining of moderates led to the outbreak of intra-conservative differences, creating serious divisions among the hard-liners. During Ahmedinejad's first term, Khamenei spent a great deal of time trying to contain this unprecedented infighting.<sup>16</sup> Matters came to a point where Khamenei, whose modus operandi was to balance among the various factions to achieve consensus, had to directly protect Ahmedinejad from other power centers who were opposed to the maverick president's bellicose foreign policy rhetoric and unorthodox domestic policy positions.

The list of senior regime figures quarreling with Ahmedinejad was quite long and included Iran's national security chief, Ali Larijani, who was opposed to the president's handling of the country's relations with Iraq and the nuclear program. Initially, Khamenei went out of his way to support Ahmedinejad: In a rare Friday sermon in September 2008, without naming the president's opponents (also allies of the supreme leader), he called on them to desist from the criticism of the president and warned that the feud was detrimental to the national interest.<sup>17</sup> Khamenei went further in support of the embattled president, calling on Ahmadinejad to push ahead with his agenda as

though he were to get a second term, remarks that were later removed from the websites of the official news agency and the supreme leader's office.

Khamenei was in a difficult position: He could not completely alienate Ahmedinejad's opponents because they were his allies, and his attempts to balance increasingly disparate factions were no longer working. Actors across the political system were critical of Ahmedinejad for different, specific reasons, but the common denominator was that his policies had made matters worse for the regime, both at home and abroad. Not wanting the Rafsanjani-led pragmatic conservatives and their reformist allies to take advantage of this situation, Khamenei doubled down on his support for Ahmedinejad after the highly controversial June 2009 election. The outcome of the vote sparked the Green Movement uprising that supported the president's main challenger, reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi.<sup>18</sup> Even though Ahmedinejad's first term was problematic for Khamenei, the supreme leader did not want to see Mousavi become president (Mousavi served as prime minister during Khamenei's two terms as president, and the two had a highly acrimonious relationship).<sup>19</sup>

Amid growing protests against what many saw as a fraudulent election, Khamenei once again took to the pulpit on June 19, just days after the election in which



the incumbent was declared victorious, to reject claims of electoral fraud and call on protesters to end their agitation. The situation was so far beyond the control of law enforcement agencies that Khamenei handed over domestic security to the IRGC, which was also given direct control over the million-strong ideological paramilitary force known as the Basij. Khamenei openly stated that Ahmedinejad’s policies were closer in outlook to his own and spoke of his differences with Rafsanjani while praising the latter’s revolutionary credentials, which underscored the extent of the conundrum that the supreme leader faced.<sup>20</sup>

While Khamenei was still trying to ensure against any challenge to Ahmedinejad’s second term from centrist and center-left factions, the emboldened president further escalated matters with his hard-line opponents. He appointed as first vice president his close friend and relative Esfandiar Rahim Mashie, a controversial politician whose commitment to the ideological foundations of the Islamic republic was seen as suspect by the conservatives, as were his remarks calling Iran a friend of the Israeli people.<sup>21</sup> This matter proved to be the turning point in Khamenei’s relationship with Ahmedinejad after the president openly defied calls from the supreme leader to remove Mashie from the position.<sup>22</sup> Ahmedinejad also fired his intelligence chief, Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, over the same issue. Eventually, Ahmedinejad relented but only to appoint Mashie as his chief of staff and top adviser. Many top regime figures such as Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani and Guardian Council chair Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati openly condemned Ahmedinejad for his disobedience to Khamenei.<sup>23</sup>

### Evolutionary Regime Change: Military Supremacy Over the Clergy

Khamenei was now facing a direct challenge to his position from Ahmedinejad, who was promoting the idea that the supreme leader’s statements were guidance and not obligatory edicts.<sup>24</sup> Khamenei’s efforts to play different factions off one another had created a much bigger crisis: Now, non-clerical and clerical actors from across the spectrum were challenging the dominant position of the clergy.

## Iranian Military’s Chain of Command



© 2024, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

During Ahmedinejad’s second term, the president would continue to assert his authority. He removed another intelligence chief, Heidar Moslehi, in April 2011 – a few months after he fired Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in December 2010 while the chief diplomat was on a foreign trip. In the case of Moslehi, Khamenei was forced to directly order his reinstatement, leading to a stand-off between the supreme leader and the president. Ahmedinejad’s publicly resisting Khamenei was unprecedented, something that even the supreme leader’s ideological opponents the reformists did not dare to do.<sup>25</sup>

The strain on the system from this infighting had reached a boiling point. Still attempting to balance various factions, Khamenei in July 2011 established yet another institution called the Supreme Board of Arbitration and Adjustment of Relations Among the Three Branches of the Government to mediate the intra-hard-liner feuding.<sup>26</sup> Former judiciary chief and senior cleric Ayatollah Mahmoud Hassan Shahrودي was appointed to head the five-member body, which included one lawmaker, one member of the Guardian



## Iranian Military Structure and Size (Estimated)

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)		Regular Forces (Artesh)	
<b>IRGC Ground Force (IRGCGF)</b>	150,000	<b>Islamic Republic of Iran Ground Force (IRIGF)</b>	350,000
<b>IRGC Navy (IRGCN)</b>	20,000	<b>Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN)</b>	18,000
<b>IRGC Aerospace Force (IRGCASF)</b>	15,000	<b>Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF)</b>	37,000
<b>IRGC Qods Force (IRGC-QF)</b>	5,000	<b>Islamic Republic of Iran Air Defense Force</b>	15,000
<b>Basij (Reserves)</b>	450,000	<b>Total:</b>	<b>420,000</b>
<b>Total (excluding Basij)</b>	190,000		
<b>Total (including Basij)</b>	<b>640,000</b>		

Note: Basij number includes estimated active reserve personnel; 500,000 to 1 million additional Basij may be mobilized in wartime.

Source: U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency

© 2024, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

Council, one from the Expediency Council and one other cleric.

The move did not produce the desired results because the regime already had a complex structure, was deeply factionalized, and was being pulled in different directions by several power centers. There was also already no shortage of institutions designed to de-conflict, such as the Expediency Council and Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), both of which came into being as part of revisions to the Islamic Republic's constitution in 1988 and 1989. With these councils already failing to work, the addition of yet another state body intended to seek the increasingly elusive balance between various ideological factions only worsened the gridlock in the system.



Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council  
Rear Adm. Ali Akbar Ahmadian (IRGC)  
(Atta Kenare / AFP via Getty Images)

### IRGC: From National Security to Political Economy

The founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, was opposed to the politicization of the

country's armed forces. This applied to not just the Artesh but also the IRGC. But Khomeini faced a dilemma in terms of the role of the military in politics. On one hand, he needed to establish the supremacy of the clerics in the then-nascent regime, while on the other, he needed to have a military force that would protect the new Islamist political order.

This resulted in the emergence of the IRGC as a parallel military to the regular armed forces.<sup>27</sup> Article 150 of the constitution of the Islamic Republic defines the IRGC as the "guardian of the Revolution and of its achievements," which entails not just a military role but also a political one. This constitutional provision allowed the IRGC to increasingly carve out a political role, which gave it an elite status. The Artesh, meanwhile, has kept out of any overt role in the politics of the Islamic republic, given that it is legally prohibited from doing so.<sup>28</sup>

This led to Khamenei leaning all the more on security forces, especially the IRGC. The Corps already had a pivotal role in national security and foreign policy domains.<sup>29</sup> The Ahmedinejad era entrenched it more deeply in politics and the economy, with many of its officers in the Cabinet. Ahmedinejad was an outsider to the political establishment and did not have a faction of his own, which was an opportunity for the Corps to leverage the president's need for allies to position itself



## Iran's Intelligence Community

■ Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS)
■ Intelligence Organization of the IRGC
■ Intelligence Protection Service of the Quds Force
■ Intelligence Unit of the Artesh (Regular Armed Forces)
■ Intelligence Protection Service of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
■ Intelligence Protection Services of Ministry of Defense
■ Inspector's Bureau of the Supreme Leader
■ Security Service of the Presidency
■ States Oversight Offices of the Guardian Council
■ Protection and Inspection Unit of the Expediency Council
■ Intelligence Protection Service of the Judiciary
■ Security and Constabulary Directorate of the Ministry of Interior

Sources: Radio Farda, Hamshahri Online  
© 2024, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

in governance.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the IRGC consolidated its political power within the Islamic republic.

From the point of view of the Corps, the fight among civilian actors was a major national security threat. At the same time, it was a historic opening for the IRGC to further enhance its position within the republic. Each faction and center of power sought support from within the IRGC. That the clergy was heavily dependent upon it to maintain its authority meant that the Corps increasingly had decision-making power.<sup>31</sup>

The intra-hard-liner power struggles pushed the regime toward a complex metamorphosis that led to the erosion of clerical supremacy over the military. The biggest beneficiary was the IRGC, which was using the crisis to emerge from its subordination to the clerics. In this way, the clergy was losing ground to both civil and military actors. While using the IRGC to

contain Ahmedinejad's administration and before him pragmatic conservative and reformist governments, Khamenei was wary of the growing power of the Corps. To prevent the IRGC from gaining too much power, he began supporting the Artesh.<sup>32</sup> The supreme leader appoints the top commanders of Artesh as well as the cleric who heads the Artesh's Ideological-Political Organization, responsible for indoctrination of the officers of the regular armed forces. This has allowed Khamenei to shape the behavior of the Artesh vis-à-vis the IRGC. The Artesh likely welcomed this new role given its competition with the Corps and because it has always had much less access to funding, weaponry, and political influence.

The IRGC nonetheless was able to strengthen itself vis-à-vis the other state institutions.<sup>33</sup> In addition to being a military force with its own ground, naval, and aerospace forces, it became highly influential in the political economy of the country. It gained control over a wide range of key state functions, including internal security; telecommunications; intelligence services; economic sectors such as construction, heavy industry and energy; weapons production; shipping; port management; circumventing sanctions; and illicit commerce. The Corps still needs the clergy to be strong enough to continue to bestow legitimacy upon its role,<sup>34</sup> but it has an interest in the elected institutions gaining greater authority given that it already has enjoyed robust presence in parliament since 2004 and hopes to one day have one of its own as the president.

### The Return of the Pragmatic Conservatives

The Ahmedinejad experiment blew up in Khamenei's face. Instead of empowering the type of conservatives he was most comfortable with, it led to infighting among competing conservative caucuses. In addition to the disastrous domestic political outcome, Ahmedinejad's presidency made matters worse for the country's foreign policy. In an effort to contain Iran's increasingly aggressive drive toward nuclear weapons in 2012, the Obama administration imposed extraordinarily harsh sanctions that hit Tehran's ability to export oil and led to a financial crunch.<sup>35</sup>

The timing could not have been worse. Iran's entire strategy for the Middle East was in jeopardy.<sup>36</sup> The



Arab Spring uprising in Syria, Tehran's main Arab state ally, became a full-blown civil war. A possible collapse of President Bashar al-Assad's regime threatened to upend the Islamic republic's efforts to develop a contiguous sphere of influence from its western flank to the Eastern Mediterranean. It was an additional strain on limited resources to where the Iranians could no longer balance between their aggressive foreign policy and maintaining political economic tranquility at home.

Khamenei knew the country could no longer avoid serious negotiations with the United States.<sup>37</sup> Ahmedinejad's second and final consecutive term was almost over, and the supreme leader needed a government that could be pragmatic enough to reach an accommodation with Washington but without giving too many concessions. New political leadership was also needed to stabilize domestic politics after the tumultuous eight years of Ahmedinejad. The supreme leader had no choice but to return to Rafsanjani's pragmatic conservatives and supported the candidacy of former national security chief and lead nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani.

Supporting Rouhani, who was quite popular, would also allow for a reset with the broader public that had been unhappy with the establishment's backing of Ahmedinejad, especially given the public backlash that erupted in the aftermath of the 2009 election. Rouhani's call for reducing tensions with the West to pull the country out of a tightening sanctions regime and steer it toward economic growth was in line with the imperatives of the establishment at the time.<sup>38</sup> The thinking was that as a member of the establishment, Rouhani would not undermine the existing political order and would represent the regime's interests in negotiations with the United States that all factions agreed were necessary.

## The Nuclear Deal

The regime needed Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his team of negotiators to secure sanctions relief via nuclear talks, but the clerical and security establishments did not want any semblance of normalization of ties with Washington, fearing it could lead to the weakening of the regime.<sup>39</sup> Pragmatic conservatives and their reformist allies did not share

this view of the hard-liners in the clergy and the military, but all factions agreed that they did not want to mothball the nuclear program in exchange for economic concessions.

With the balance of power between the clergy and the IRGC having shifted heavily in favor of the latter, the new fault line in the system was between the IRGC and the Rouhani government.<sup>40</sup> While supportive of the nuclear negotiations, the Corps was deeply concerned that any deal would result in a rollback of its influence over the economy. Willing to work with the IRGC in its efforts to play a role in economic revival, Rouhani also wanted to push back the disproportionate amount of influence that the Corps had gained in the country's political economy.

Reducing the influence of the Corps and maintaining clerical supremacy over the military was in Khamenei's interest, and he therefore supported Rouhani's agenda. Within a month of the new administration taking office, the supreme leader called on the IRGC to steer clear of politics.<sup>41</sup> However, Khamenei still needed the Corps to keep Rouhani and the pragmatic conservatives in check. Rouhani's economic liberalization agenda would reintegrate the country with the global economy, which the clergy was nervous about, and this is where its interests converged with those of the IRGC. The line between pragmatic conservatism and reformism was always blurry; as a moderate conservative, Rouhani was seen as closer to the left than many of those on his side of the political spectrum.

The IRGC's rise as a political economic faction<sup>42</sup> altered the schism between Iran's theocrats and its elected leadership. By the time Rouhani's administration began formal nuclear talks with the Obama administration in late 2013, the Corps had replaced the clergy as the main opponent of the civilian elected political class, despite the IRGC's history of closely working with Rouhani on national security. The clerics remained highly influential, but they were no longer the driving force within the Islamic republic.

The 2015 agreement intended to dismantle Iran's nuclear weapons program in exchange for at least \$100 billion dollars worth of sanctions relief boosted the Rouhani government's position at home. However, the negotiations with the Obama administration



Iranian lawmakers approve the nuclear deal Oct. 13, 2015, in Tehran. (Fatemeh Bahrami / Anadolu Agency / Getty Images)

exacerbated the internal power struggle with fears among hard-liners that the growing contact between Tehran and Washington would subvert the republic. Khamenei himself warned of a U.S. “infiltration” via senior government officials whom he said were not willing collaborators but whose behavior aided American attempts to undermine the regime from within.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, then-IRGC chief Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari said the nuclear deal had kicked off a long-term process to contaminate the thought and behavior of the Iranian leadership.

### The IRGC, Constraints, and Artesh

The IRGC used the nuclear deal as leverage to assume a lead role in the domestic political struggle. However, it also faced a dilemma: While wary of the deal, the Corps recognized that financial relief was critical for Iran’s domestic stability and that reduced tensions with Washington would provide Tehran with an enhanced ability to consolidate the ambitious foreign policy gains it had made over the years.

It was this imperative that Rouhani latched on to as part of his government’s effort to go on the counterattack, which would explain why he struck back with the charge of extremism against his critics.<sup>44</sup> By denouncing them as extremists, he was hoping to isolate the ideologues and appeal to the many within the system who understood the need for pragmatism, especially among the Corps but also

in the Artesh, which has a significant role in national security and foreign policy decision-making through its representation within the SNSC, the Islamic Republic’s highest decision-making body.<sup>45</sup> The IRGC is neither a monolithic nor a theocratic entity, and the nature of its activities renders it more open to balancing ideological thought with pragmatic behavior. This is unlike the clergy whose ideology and interests are centered around its conservative religious and political ideology.

Rouhani’s goal was to empower elements within the Corps that saw the nuclear deal as an opportunity rather than a threat for the Islamic republic. The only way in which Rouhani could succeed was if a broad coalition of clerics and officers would at least not actively oppose the understanding he was trying to reach with the United States, if not tacitly support the policy. As a cleric himself, he knew how to navigate the theocratic landscape, but the security establishment was a domain where he had limited leverage.<sup>46</sup>

Tehran would not have signed the nuclear deal if the pragmatists within both military organizations did not prevail over the more ideological types. While generally a deeply ideological force, the IRGC is not bereft of pragmatism when the need arises. Ideological affinity is anything but uniform across the IRGC’s commanders and officers. Differences on strategy and tactics in both military matters and those having to do with political and economic statecraft likely



informed the IRGC's decision to not actively oppose the nuclear deal.

Hard-line rhetoric from the Corps therefore needs to be separated from actual policy decisions. Often, the bellicose discourse is a tool to shape internal negotiations, to placate the radical base, and for foreign policy posturing. It is also inconceivable that the IRGC would continue to create obstacles to the efforts to clinch the 2015 nuclear deal, which had the full backing of the supreme leader. Conversely, Khamenei would have been relying on pragmatists within the IRGC to push ahead with the negotiations.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike the IRGC, which was founded as an ideological military, the Artesh is a professional armed force that appears more secular and Iranian nationalist than its more Shia Islamist doctrinaire rival.<sup>48</sup> In sharp contrast with the IRGC, the Artesh has largely refrained from taking public political positions and has steered clear of involvement in domestic politics. That said, as a force committed to national defense, it cannot be expected to indefinitely ignore the domestic upheaval that has been taking place for the better part of the past decade, especially if the IRGC moves toward a military takeover of the polity.<sup>49</sup> Of course, this would be contingent upon the supreme leader empowering the Artesh.<sup>50</sup> Constitutionally, the Artesh's chief mandate is to protect the integrity of the country and its people as opposed to defending its ideology, which is the responsibility of the IRGC.<sup>51</sup> As was evident during the Green Movement, the Artesh is receptive to the public mood, and given its general orientation, it can be expected to step into the fray in the event of any danger to the state.<sup>52</sup> In a future scenario pitting the regime against a restive public, the Artesh will get involved to prevent anarchy, which could render the country vulnerable to external aggression.

There is also the matter of its rivalry with the IRGC, which despite being a much smaller force had gained a disproportionate amount of control over the republic.<sup>53</sup> Khamenei's 2011 decision to empower the Artesh to balance against the IRGC serves as a precedent for the supreme leader to repeat should he fear that the IRGC could take over after his passing. Regardless, at a time when ideology is threatening the future of the Islamic republic, the Artesh cannot be expected to sit on the sidelines, though it will need to find a way to balance

its constitutionally apolitical role and the need to shape policy via the SNSC.

Of course, the commander-in-chief of both the Artesh and the Corps is Khamenei, whose positions neither force can ignore. However, the Artesh could influence him, especially when the supreme leader – despite his own reservations – cautiously supported the diplomacy surrounding the nuclear deal. Furthermore, to the extent that Khamenei tries to balance the Corps with the Artesh is something the conventional military is likely to leverage ahead of the supreme leader's passing. Making use of the joint command structure known as the Armed Forces General Staff, the Artesh could also align with like-minded IRGC elements.

### The Decaying of the Republic

Rouhani was thus able to press ahead with the implementation of the nuclear deal and the expectation that it would significantly help improve the Iranian economy, which enabled him to win re-election in June 2017 with a bigger mandate. But there were already signs of a major reversal in the making with the inauguration of President Donald Trump earlier that same year. While it was not until May 2018 that the Trump White House withdrew from the nuclear agreement, the Rouhani government knew it was in trouble much earlier, especially with the economic protests that broke out within months of the start of his second term and especially the pressure from hawks within the clergy and the Corps.<sup>54</sup> Trump's move to implement his policy of "maximum pressure," reinstating the sanctions that had been lifted and piling on additional ones, empowered those in Tehran who were already opposed to the agreement because of its potential to weaken their domestic standing.

Trump's decision to designate the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization in 2019 further reinforced this trend. As a result, Rouhani became a lame duck president in his second term. But the more important development was that the Iranian regime was plunged into an even bigger crisis than before. Its strategy of relying on pragmatic conservatives to get out from underneath the crushing weight of the sanctions had failed. The radicals were able to steer the regime to hostile actions as part of the effort to counter the Trump administration's policy





of increasing the economic pain to negotiate a new agreement, which included assaults on commercial ships, attacks on Saudi Arabia through proxies in Yemen, and targeting U.S. forces in Iraq.<sup>55</sup>

These tensions came to a head with the January 2020 assassination of the head of the IRGC's Quds Force, Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq. The decapitation of the Corps' overseas operations had two consequences for the Iranian clerical and security establishments. First, it exacerbated the internal strife between factions that did not wish to see a confrontation with



Commander of IRGC's Quds Force Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani (Morteza Nikoubazl / NurPhoto via Getty Images)

Washington and those arguing that the United States was determined to weaken the IRGC and by extension the Islamic republic. Second, the prevailing analysis was that the U.S. government, by engaging in the unprecedented move to eliminate the most prominent IRGC general, was now behaving unpredictably, and any further escalation from Tehran's side would only result in a conflict that the Islamic republic was not prepared for. This view was likely being pushed by the pragmatists, but it was one that even the most hard-line of elements among the clergy and the Corps were forced to accept, which led to the decision to stage a symbolic retaliatory strike against a U.S. base in Iraq. Tehran had alerted Washington of this in advance through Baghdad.<sup>56</sup>

A number of other factors led to the regime avoiding further confrontation, including financial pressure from renewed sanctions; a series of economic protests that began in the initial months of Rouhani's second term and continued on and off through 2021; the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Iran particularly hard; Tehran presuming that Trump was unlikely to be re-elected; and a spike in covert Israeli attacks on Iranian nuclear targets, including the assassination of nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in November 2020.<sup>57</sup>

While there were no guarantees that President Joe Biden would win the 2020 vote, the Iranians had no other good options but to wait and see. The pragmatists within the regime were able to prevail with their view that there was no other way forward but to try and revive the nuclear deal under a future Biden administration. The assassination of Soleimani, a celebrated general who played a pivotal role in the regime's efforts to develop deep and extensive influence in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, was a blow to the hard-liners whose policies had led to the strike.

Khamenei and the clergy were facing setbacks on the foreign policy front, where they kept reaching out to renegotiate the nuclear deal despite a lukewarm response from the Biden administration, as well as on the domestic level after the Guardian Council disqualified Larijani from running for president despite being the head of a major faction within the regime.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the most significant indicator of the extent to which Khamenei and the clergy have seen their authority decline is the June 2022 incident when the IRGC removed the cleric who led its intelligence arm and replaced him with a general.<sup>59</sup> Both the civilian intelligence service, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, and the IRGC's Intelligence Organization have always been headed by clerics. Thus, a general replacing a cleric highlighted a major shift in the balance of power between the IRGC and the clergy.

Ibrahim Raisi's election as president in 2021, a result of unprecedented electoral engineering, shows the extent to which the regime's own system has broken down. Raisi is the first president of the Islamic republic who is neither a genuine cleric nor a politician; rather, he is a zealous operative who prosecuted opponents of the regime.<sup>60</sup> Under Raisi, the government began strict enforcement of the dress code on women, which led to the September 2022 death of Mahsa Amini, a young girl, while in the custody of the morality police.

Amini's killing set off a wave of unprecedented nationwide protests that lasted for many months. Women across the country openly defied the dress code, putting the regime on defensive. Many regime figures, including Larijani, called for an end to the state's enforcement of the hijab. Even Khamenei said those who do not wear the head covering should



not be treated as anti-religion or against the state's revolutionary ideals.<sup>61</sup>

## The Rapidly Approaching Post-Khamenei Era

While the regime has shown that it can still weather public protests, there is not much it can do to reverse the scale of public disaffection. The 2021 presidential election saw a record low turnout, and recent reports suggest turnout for the March 2024 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections was officially around 40 percent, though other reports suggest that it was around 25 percent.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, infighting within the ruling elite is only intensifying as was evident with former president Rouhani's disqualification from seeking re-election to the Assembly of Experts.

Moreover, the theocracy in Tehran is in an advanced state of decay. Recent public opinion surveys conducted by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance show that nearly three-quarters of Iranians want a secular state and only one in 10 people think women should be forced to wear the hijab.<sup>63</sup> This decline in religiosity has the broader clerical establishment alarmed about not just the stability of the political order but also the pivotal societal role that clerics have played for centuries. The broader swath of clergy beyond the power corridors in Tehran fear the public is not just rejecting the Islamist ideology of the Iranian state built around the concept of *Velayat-e-Faqih* (state ruled by jurist) but also the core of Shia Islam in which each individual believer follows a marjaa (religious authority) in personal and social matters. Many among the clerics in Iran's religious center of Qom are concerned that the regime's decades-long efforts to impose its political ideology on the public is threatening the historic position of Shia religious scholars. This implies that the only path forward for the clergy is the quietist approach of Iraq's Shia clergy led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani that is against the clergy's direct involvement in politics.

Compounding this situation is the status of Khamenei himself. The health of the octogenarian cleric at the helm in Tehran, who has held the regime together for the bulk of its existence, is failing. His authority has been on the wane for years, and when he steps down or passes away, his successor is unlikely to

wield the influence over the state, especially its armed forces, that the incumbent has enjoyed. If anything, the military will have far more influence over the next top ayatollah, who is likely to be a conservative. A weak supreme leader also means that other cleric-dominated institutions – such as the Assembly of Experts, the Guardians Council, and the judiciary – will see their influence wane.

A decline in the influence of clergy means that the military will become the locus of power within the Islamic republic, which has raised fears of an IRGC coup. This is unlikely to happen in Iran, for a number of reasons. First, the clergy is the institutional and ideological foil through which the Corps derives power and legitimacy; if the IRGC makes extra-constitutional moves, there is a great danger of the system falling apart. Second, there is growing disillusionment among the public and disagreements within the security establishment about the best way to handle such a hypothetical situation. Despite having long maintained internal cohesion, the Corps is not immune to societal cleavages and infighting among factions; crises can lead to the fracturing of even the most disciplined organizations, and the IRGC is no exception. Third, even though the IRGC is the dominant force of Iran's parallel militaries, the Artesh is much larger in size. If the regular military backed by the senior clergy opposes a coup, the IRGC is unlikely to have the firepower necessary to take control.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, the regime has made several foreign policy gains over the past 15 years in the region via its proxies, especially the al-Houthi fighters in Yemen.<sup>64</sup> Tehran also is seeking to exploit the war in Gaza that has killed tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians and has created an unprecedented crisis for the United States, Israel, and the Arab states.<sup>65</sup> The IRGC does not want to risk squandering these situations because of domestic political infighting, especially amid threats of a regional war with Israel and the United States.

Therefore, it is in the IRGC's interest to find common ground with the Artesh in terms of how the two militaries will work together to support an elected government to restore the stability of the political system. Achieving domestic harmony is even more critical considering that the clergy's agenda



President Ibrahim Raisi (Sakineh Salimi / Borna News / Aksonline ATP Images / Getty Images)

the IRGC.<sup>67</sup> Underscoring all this is the military establishment's recognition that despite power shifting to it from the clergy, it cannot govern without broader public support. Lifting social restrictions could help defuse some public anger against the regime. However, such a move could exacerbate intra-elite differences and embolden the public for more broader political freedoms, especially at a time of severe economic

stress and growing risks from an increasingly aggressive push on the foreign policy front as well as attacks on its own soil from a variety of anti-regime elements and transnational Sunni Islamist militants.<sup>68</sup>

### Policy Implications

Inevitable changes in Iran's political system need to be factored into U.S. policies regarding the Islamic republic and the broader region. Expecting regime collapse or actively pursuing regime change are not sound policies when it comes to managing Iran's foreign policy behavior. Washington must consider the metamorphosis underway in Tehran and act accordingly. Otherwise, it will be expending unnecessary resources on uncertain outcomes that could undermine American interests. There is a need to manage and leverage natural change inside Iran, which should complement the efforts to sustain international pressure. Over time, the mix of geopolitical constraints and latitudes could steer Iran's radical actors toward ideological and behavioral transformation.

Washington will have to be prepared to take advantage of the fast-approaching change in supreme leadership and, by extension, the regime's behavior. It will need to leverage pragmatic elements within the security and clerical establishments who realize that they will need to heed public demands for greater freedoms, upholding of human rights, rule of law, and economic development. The way to do this is to not solely focus

Iranian demonstrators take to the streets of Tehran during a September 2022 protest for Mahsa Amini days after she died in police custody. Protests spread across Iran and the world after her arrest by Iran's morality police. (AFP via Getty Images)

is increasingly unpopular, and assuaging political grievances is an imperative under the current financial strain.

The military will have significant influence over policy, particularly because it has the lead on domestic security and national defense. At the same time, it will have to rely on the government, which will also have greater influence over policy matters because the clergy's input will not be as potent as it has been under Khamenei's supreme leadership.

With the impending watershed change at the apex of the regime, the challenge for the ruling elite in Tehran is how, amid growing domestic constraints, it can continue its efforts to exploit regional instability. Many within the political elite have realized that the Islamic republic will not be able to endure without a course correction in terms of how the country is governed.<sup>66</sup>

The transition process will nonetheless be messy; judging by the developments in recent years and the just-concluded parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections as well as internal divisions within



on the nuclear issue, which the regime has been using to secure respite from sanctions while not giving up much on its quest for nuclear weapons. Leveraging the growing internal and external pressures on the regime, the United States will need to broaden the scope of talks to include Tehran's domestic as well as broader foreign policies. Iranian support for militant proxies in the Arab world will need to be linked to the lifting of sanctions. Such a strategy must be long-term in nature, have bipartisan buy-in, and include international stakeholders.

It is tempting to compare Iran's impending transition to the largely smooth manner in which Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, has clipped the wings of the kingdom's religious establishment and granted citizens social freedoms over the past seven years.<sup>69</sup> However, the relative ease of that change was in large part because Saudi religious scholars have never had oversight over politics and governance, which made it easier for Riyadh to curb their role in public life. In sharp contrast, Iran's clerical establishment not only has a far more active role in the lives of the Shia Muslims but also is in direct control over all key state institutions. The coming transition in Iran will thus be longer and more tumultuous due to different factions trying to enhance their power or struggling to preserve it.

The process of evolutionary regime change that has been underway in Iran for at least a better part of the past decade is accelerating and approaching a critical turning point. The Islamic republic is at an impasse; to avoid systemic breakdown, it has no choice but to evolve. The U.S. government needs to be prepared

to take advantage of this internal metamorphosis. Washington will need a new strategy to shape the behavior of an Iranian polity in flux – one that takes into account the manner in which the internal balance of power in Tehran will likely shift.

It is difficult to point out with any degree of precision what the Islamic republic will look like once it is on the other side of the transition. What is clear, though, is that the theocracy is unlikely to be the driver of the political system. The decline of the clerics does not mean the transition will lead to strengthening of republican institutions, given how that process will be circumscribed by the country's military. At the same time, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the regime would gradually shed its hard-line Islamist ideology in the theocratic sense, but its behavior will continue to be driven by a blend of Iranian nationalism and Islamic identity.

Just as China tempered its communism in the late 1970s but continues to pursue its national interests, so too can a post-Khamenei Iran with respect to its Islamism. It might become somewhat less of an oppressive state at home, but Tehran will not give up its geopolitical holdings in its strategic environs particularly at a moment when its conflict with Israel has entered an era of direct confrontation. In the long run and depending upon the internal balance of power, Tehran may adopt a more pragmatic foreign policy approach. However, it will continue to pursue its regional interests and thus pose a challenge to Middle Eastern security and by extension U.S. interests, especially as it does not face any capable countervailing forces in the Arab world.<sup>70</sup>



**Dr. Kamran Bokhari** is the Senior Director of the Eurasian Security and Prosperity portfolio at the New Lines Institute where he previously served as Director of the Analytical Development Department from 2019 to 2023. Dr. Bokhari is also a national security and foreign policy specialist at the University of Ottawa's Professional Development Institute. He has also served as the Central Asia Studies Course Coordinator at U.S. State Department's Foreign Service Institute. He tweets at [@KamranBokhari](https://twitter.com/KamranBokhari).



## Endnotes

- 1 Bokhari, Kamran (2024, April 11). Iran's Vulnerable Eastern Flank. *Geopolitical Futures*. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/irans-vulnerable-eastern-flank/>
- 2 (2013, Aug 2). U.S., Iran: Why They Will Now Likely Negotiate. *Stratfor*. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/us-iran-why-they-will-now-likely-negotiate>
- 3 Bokhari, Kamran (2016, Feb 12). Iran's Evolving Domestic Politics. *Geopolitical Futures*. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/irans-evolving-domestic-politics/>
- 4 (2004, Jan 14). The Twisting Maze of Iranian Politics. *Stratfor*. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/twisting-maze-iranian-politics>
- 5 Sadjadpour, Karim (2009). Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour\\_iran\\_final2.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sadjadpour_iran_final2.pdf)
- 6 Ghlabi, Mazyar (2019, April 27). The Council of Expediency: Crisis and Statecraft in Iran and Beyond. *Middle Eastern Studies* 55:5, 837-853, DOI: [10.1080/00263206.2019.1585346](https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2019.1585346)
- 7 Sanam Vakil and Hossein Rassam (2017, April 9). Iran's Next Supreme Leader: The Islamic Republic After Khamenei. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-04-09/iran-s-next-supreme-leader>
- 8 Bokhari, Kamran (2018, January 10). Iran's Regime at War With Itself. *Geopolitical Futures*. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/irans-regime-war/>
- 9 Vatanka, Alex (2017, January 10). After Rafsanjani What the Ex-President's Death Means for Iran. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-01-10/after-rafsanjani>
- 10 Pinkley, Brandon (2018, July). Guarding History The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Memory of the Iran-Iraq War. *Joint History Office Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*. [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Monographs/Iran\\_study\\_complete.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Monographs/Iran_study_complete.pdf)
- 11 Tazmini. Ghoncheh (2009, April 30). Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform. *IB Tauris*
- 12 Fathi, Nazila. (2004, Jan 12). Hard-Line Iranian Council Bars Thousands from Vote. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/12/world/hard-line-iranian-council-bars-thousands-from-vote.html>
- 13 Kapiszewski, Andrzej (2006). Iran's 2005 Presidential Elections and their Impact on the Republic's Politics. *European Union Institute for Security Studies*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep07012.5.pdf>
- 14 Wehrey, F., Green, J. D., Nichiporuk, B., Nader, A., Hansell, L., Nafisi, R., & Bohandy, S. R. (2009). The IRGC in Politics. In *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (pp. 77-92). *RAND Corporation*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/107249/mg82losd.l3>
- 15 (2008, June 3). Iran: The Media and the Conservatives' Power Struggle. *Stratfor*. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iran-media-and-conservatives-power-struggle>
- 16 (2008, Jan 21). Iran: Systemic Opposition to Ahmadinejad Going Critical. *Stratfor*. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iran-systemic-opposition-ahmadinejad-going-critical>
- 17 (2008, Sep 19) Iran: A Spotlight on the Intra-Conservative Rift. *Stratfor*. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iran-spotlight-intra-conservative-rift>
- 18 Akbar, A. (2021). The Green Movement in Iran: Reformist Roots and Objective. *Protest*, 1(1), 29-53. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2667372X-01010002>
- 19 Taeb, Ezzat (2016, May 11). When Khamenei Fought Khomeini over Mousavi – and Lost. *Iran Wire*. <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/61792/>
- 20 (2009, June 19). Iran: The Supreme Leader Draws the Line. *Stratfor*. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iran-supreme-leader-draws-line>
- 21 Bozorgmehr, Najmeh (2008, September 8). Pressure Mounts on Iran President. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/47d8ccda-7dcc-11dd-bbdb-000077b07658>
- 22 Milani, Abbas (2011, July 21). Ahmadinejad vs. The Ayatollah. *The National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/article/ahmadinejad-vs-the-ayatollah-5441>
- 23 (2009, July 31). Iran: The Intra-Hardliner Rift Intensifies. *Stratfor*. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iran-intra-hardliner-rift-intensifies>
- 24 Sahimi, Muhammad (2011, April 18). Ahmadinejad, Khamenei Reported at Odds over Intel Chief's Resignation. *PBS Frontline*. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/04/ahmadinejad-khamenei-reported-at-odds-over-intel-chiefs-resignation.html>
- 25 (2011, July 19). Long-Term Consequences of Iran's Intra-Elite Struggle. *Stratfor*. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/long-term-consequences-irans-intra-elite-struggle>
- 26 (2011, July 28). In Iran, New Board Suggests Weakened Political System. *Stratfor*. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iran-new-board-suggests-weakened-political-system>
- 27 Katzman, Ken (2011, November 15). The Politics of Iran's Regular Military. In *Middle East Institute Viewpoints, The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military, 10-12*. *The Middle East Institute*. [https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military\\_171758621702.pdf](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military_171758621702.pdf)
- 28 Hossein, Aryan (2011, November 15). Iran's Marginalized and Under-Armed Conventional Military. In *Middle East Institute Viewpoints, The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military, pp.46-50*. *Middle East Institute*. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/politics-irans-regular-army>
- 29 Tabatabai, Ariane M. (2019, October). Iran's National Security Debate: Implications for Future U.S.-Iran Negotiations. *Rand Corporation*. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE344/RAND\\_PE344.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE344/RAND_PE344.pdf)
- 30 Alfoneh, Ali (2008, September 1). The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics. *American Enterprise Institute*. <https://aei.org/articles/the-revolutionary-guards-role-in-iranian-politics/>



- 31 Alfoneh, Ali (2013, April 18). Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship. *American Enterprise Institute Press*.
- 32 Vatanka, Alex (2012, January 27). Ayatollah Khamenei's Advances Toward the Artesh. *Middle East Institute*. <https://mei.edu/publications/ayatollah-khameneis-advances-toward-artesh>
- 33 Ostovar, Afshon (2018, April 15). Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards. *Oxford University Press*.
- 34 Abdi, Marie (2024, February 23) Moving to a post-Khamenei era: The role of the IRGC and the Clergy. *Middle East Institute*. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/moving-post-khamenei-era-role-irgc-and-clergy>
- 35 Rachele Younglai and Timothy Gardner (2012, April 6). U.S. Not Backing Off as Iran Sanctions Bite. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-iran-sanctions-idINDEE8340KV20120406/>
- 36 (2012, Aug 3). Iran's Arc of Influence in Jeopardy. *Stratfor*: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/irans-arc-influence-jeopardy>
- 37 Helene Cooper and Mark Landler (2012, Oct 20). U.S. Officials Say Iran Has Agreed to Nuclear Talks. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/world/iran-said-ready-to-talk-to-us-about-nuclear-program.html>
- 38 (2013, Jun 15). Iran's Opportunities with Rouhani. *Stratfor*: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/irans-opportunities-rouhani>
- 39 Esfandiari, Haleh (2015, Feb 2) The Significance of Hard-Liners' Criticism of Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif. *The Wilson Center*: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/the-significance-hard-liners-criticism-iranian-foreign-minister-zarif>
- 40 (2013, September 19). Iran: Rebalancing Civil-Military Relations. *Stratfor*: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iran-rebalancing-civil-military-relations>
- 41 (2014, Aug 8). Iran's Elite Military Force Faces Limitations. *Stratfor*: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/irans-elite-military-force-faces-limitations>
- 42 (2012, October). The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Part I: An Unconventional Military Force. *Stratfor*: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-part-i-unconventional-military>
- 43 Gass, Nick (2015, October 7). Iran's supreme leader: No More Talks with the U.S. *Politico*. <https://politico.com/story/2015/10/iran-ayatollah-khamenei-no-us-talks-negotiations-214495>
- 44 Nakhoul, Samia (2016, February 24). Ahead of Election, Iran's Leader Warns of Western "plot". *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0VX0RC/>
- 45 The Iran Primer (2020, July 15). Supreme National Security Council of Iran. *United States Institute of Peace*, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/apr/01/supreme-national-security-council-iran>
- 46 Nasser, Ladane (2015, April 2). Rouhani Buoyed by Nuclear Deal in Battle with Hard Liners. *Bloomberg* <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-04-02/rouhani-buoyed-by-nuclear-deal-in-battle-with-iran-s-hardliners>
- 47 Ganji, Akbar (2013, November 10) Revolutionary Pragmatists Why Iran's Military Won't Spoil Détente with the U.S. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2013-11-10/revolutionary-pragmatists>
- 48 Ken Katzman, Laura Grossman, Fatemah Aman, Gawdat Bahgat et al (2011). The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military. *Middle East Institute*. [https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military\\_171758621702.pdf](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military_171758621702.pdf)
- 49 Hassan-Yari, Houchang (2011, November). The Artesh and Revolution. In Middle East Institute Viewpoints, *The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military*. *The Middle East Institute*, 29-31. [https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military\\_171758621702.pdf](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military_171758621702.pdf)
- 50 Vatanka 2011, Op Cit.
- 51 Sokkary, Sharif (2011, November 15). A United States Marine's View of the Artesh and the IRGC. In Middle East Viewpoints, *The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military*, pp.51-54. *The Middle East Institute*. [https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military\\_171758621702.pdf](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military_171758621702.pdf)
- 52 Aman, Fatemah (2011, November 15). Living with the Artesh's Green Sympathies. In Middle East Viewpoints, *The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military*, pp.16-19. *The Middle East Institute*. [https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military\\_171758621702.pdf](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military_171758621702.pdf)
- 53 Alfoneh, Ali (2011, November 15). Eternal Rivals? The Artesh and the IRGC. In Middle East Institute Viewpoints, *The Artesh: Iran's Marginalized Regular Military*, pp.32-35. *The Middle East Institute*. [https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military\\_171758621702.pdf](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/the-artesh-irans-marginalized-regular-military_171758621702.pdf)
- 54 Hafezi, Parisa (2018, May 4). Nuclear Deal a Challenge for Rouhani as Iran Hardliners Close In. *Reuters*. <https://reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-politics-analysis/nuclear-deal-a-challenge-for-rouhani-as-iran-hardliners-close-in-idUSKBNI51P0/>
- 55 (2019, November 26). Special Report: 'Time to Take Out Our Swords' - Inside Iran's Plot to Attack Saudi Arabia. *Reuters*. <https://reuters.com/article/idUSKBNI51P0/>
- 56 Harris, S., Dawsey, J., Lamothe, D., and Ryan, M. (2020, January 8). Trump Administration as the Iranian Missiles Began to Fall. *Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-officials-knew-iranian-missiles-were-coming-hours-in-advance/2020/01/08/b6297b4c-3235-11ea-a053-dc6d944ba776\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-officials-knew-iranian-missiles-were-coming-hours-in-advance/2020/01/08/b6297b4c-3235-11ea-a053-dc6d944ba776_story.html)
- 57 Bokhari, Kamran (2020, Nov 27). Home is No haven for Iran. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/home-is-no-haven-for-irans-regime-11606519724>
- 58 Wintour, Patrick (2021, June 4) Iran's Supreme Leader Says Rejected Election Candidates Were 'Wronged'. *The Guardian*. <https://theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/04/irans-supreme-leader-says-rejected-election-candidates-were-wronged>



- 59 Esfandiari, Golnaz (2022, June 24). In Major Security Shake-Up, Iran Replaces IRGC Intelligence Chief. *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-irgc-intelligence-chief-reshuffle/31913944.html>
- 60 Hammond, Joseph (2021, June 16). Ebrahim Raisi Poised to Sweep into Iranian Presidency Despite Weak Religious Credentials. *Religion News Service*. <https://religionnews.com/2021/06/16/ebrahim-raisi-poised-to-sweep-into-iranian-presidency-despite-weak-religious-credentials/>
- 61 Karami, Arash (2023, January 5). Iran's Khamenei strikes conciliatory message on hijab. *Al-Monitor*. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/irans-khamenei-strikes-conciliatory-message-hijab>
- 62 Lipin, Michael (2024, March 7). Iran's Claimed 41% Election Turnout 'Golden' for Authoritarian Uncompetitive Votes. *Voice of America*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-s-claimed-41-election-turnout-golden-for-authoritarian-uncompetitive-votes/7518077.html>
- 63 Swan, Melanie (2024, Feb 25). Vast majority of Iranians want a secular government, poll reveals. *The Telegraph*. <https://telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/02/25/iran-poll-no-hijab-more-freedom-secular-rule-less-religious/>
- 64 (2024, February). Iran: Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East. *Defense Intelligence Agency*. [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military\\_Power\\_Publications/Iran\\_Houthi\\_Final.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Iran_Houthi_Final.pdf)
- 65 Bokhari, Kamran (2023, Dec 21). Yemen's Houthis and Iran's Encircling of Saudi Arabia. *Geopolitical Futures*. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/yemens-houthis-and-irans-encircling-of-saudi-arabia/>
- 66 Iran Primer (2023, Aug 30) Dissent Among Iran Elite Over Protests. *United States Institute of Peace*. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/dec/07/dissent-among-iran-elite-over-protests>
- 67 Bokhari, Kamran (2024, March 7). Iranian Elections and the Future of the Regime. *Geopolitical Futures*. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/iranian-elections-and-the-future-of-the-regime/>
- 68 Bokhari, Kamran (2024, March 28). Jihadists Exploit US Conflicts with Russia and Iran. *Geopolitical Futures*. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/jihadists-exploit-us-conflicts-with-russia-and-iran/>
- 69 Farouk, Yasmine & Brown, Nathan J. (2021, June 7). Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>
- 70 Bokhari, Kamran (2024, Jan 4). The Limits of Iran's Geopolitical Expansion. *Geopolitical Futures*. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-limits-of-irans-geopolitical-expansion/>

## Contact



For media inquiries, email [media@newlinesinstitute.org](mailto:media@newlinesinstitute.org)



To submit a piece to the New Lines Institute, email [submissions@newlinesinstitute.org](mailto:submissions@newlinesinstitute.org)



For other inquiries, send an email to [info@newlinesinstitute.org](mailto:info@newlinesinstitute.org)



1660 L St NW, Ste 450  
Washington, DC 20036



(202) 800-7302

## Connect With Us



@newlinesinst



@New Lines Institute  
for Strategy and Policy



Subscribe



Sign up