

## **The Supreme Leader Karim Sadjadpour**

- Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is Iran's most powerful official. As supreme leader, he has constitutional authority or substantial influence over the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government as well as the military and media.
- Khamenei lacks the religious credentials and popular support of his predecessor, revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. As a result, Khamenei has been more insecure and vulnerable to criticism from religious and political circles.
- Khamenei had tried to cultivate the image of a magnanimous guide above the political fray. But his support of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the disputed 2009 elections – amid mass protests and unprecedented political fissures – further undermined his legitimacy and support.
- Khamenei is primarily interested in protecting his power and ensuring the survival of the Islamic theocracy, which he believes is based on justice, independence, self-sufficiency and piety.
- Khamenei's foreign policy is driven by animosity to the United States and Israel. It is unclear whether he could abandon this position without undermining the *raison d'être* of the Islamic system.

### **Overview**

There are few leaders in the world more important to current world affairs but less understood than Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran. He is the single most powerful individual in a highly factionalized, autocratic regime. No major decisions can be taken without his consent, and his top priorities are his own survival and that of the Islamic Republic.

In theory, Iran's constitution was meant to combine theocracy with republicanism. But in practice, Iran's unelected institutions, namely the supreme leader and 12-man Guardian Council, wield far more power than elected institutions like the presidency and parliament. The Guardian Council has the authority to vet all candidates for public office and disqualify any who are not deemed sufficiently loyal to the supreme leader.

Khamenei lacks the popular support, charisma and theological qualifications that Khomeini enjoyed, but his ability to stay out of the limelight contributed to his political resilience – until recently. He has consistently favored conservatives over reformers. His image as the great balancer has been seriously challenged by the disputed 2009 elections, his staunch defense of Ahmadinejad, and the crackdown on protesters.

## **Khamenei's rise**

Khamenei was born in 1939 to a traditional family of humble origins. His father was a cleric, and he began a religious education at a young age. In his early twenties, he studied under Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom; through Khomeini he became involved in the rebellion against the shah. He was arrested numerous times in the 1960s and 1970s, spending several years in prison where he was tortured by the Savak secret police.

After the shah's ouster, Khamenei briefly served as minister of defense and then supervisor of the Revolutionary Guards. In 1981, he survived an assassination attempt that paralyzed his right arm. Later that year, after one president was impeached and a second assassinated, Khamenei was asked by the revolutionary elites to run for president. He served the maximum two terms, from 1981 to 1989. His tenure was dominated by the Iran-Iraq War, but he played a secondary political role behind Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, Speaker of the Parliament Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Revolutionary Guard Commander Mohsen Rezai.

Ayatollah Khomeini died in 1989 just months after firing his heir apparent, leaving no designated replacement. With the help of Rafsanjani, Khamenei emerged as the default choice to become the new supreme leader. His appointment was opposed by some senior clerics who felt he was unqualified, but the Assembly of Experts eventually approved him. Today, his likeness – black turban, oversized glasses, Palestinian *kaffiyeh*, and untrimmed gray beard – is ubiquitous in shop and government offices, and on billboards.

## **The leader's powers**

Revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini introduced the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist. It is derived from Shiite Islam, which believes twelve imams descended from the Prophet Mohammed who inherited his political and religious authority. The twelfth imam went into occultation or hiding in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and Twelver Shiites believe he will one day return as a messiah. In the absence of the twelfth imam, Khomeini argued, the missing imam's authority on earth could be exercised by a supreme leader chosen from among the clergy.

As supreme leader, Khamenei has constitutional authority over the judiciary, the regular armed forces and the elite Revolutionary Guards, and the state-controlled media. He also has effective control over Iran's second most powerful institution, the 12-member Guardian Council, which has the authority to vet electoral candidates and veto parliamentary decisions. (Khamenei appoints half its members, as well as the judicial chief who appoints the other half.) The Iranian economy is largely state-controlled, and Khamenei has the most authority over how the country's oil revenue is spent. He also has control over the country's bonyads – charitable foundations with

billions of dollars in assets – in addition to the millions more his office receives in charitable donations offered to Iran’s holy shrines.

Despite his constitutional powers, Khamenei has often been overshadowed by Iran’s presidents. From 1989 to 1997, foreign governments and the international media perceived parliamentary speaker Rafsanjani, not Khamenei, as Iran’s most powerful official. From 1997 to 2005, President Mohammad Khatami upstaged Khamenei from the left with his calls for reform at home and a “dialogue of civilizations” with the West. Since 2005, Ahmadinejad has outflanked him from the right with his diatribes against Israel and Holocaust revisionism. Yet Khamenei’s views have ultimately prevailed: His domestic vision for Iran is more Islamic than republican. And his foreign policy position is neither outright confrontation nor accommodation.

Several factors have also helped Khamenei gradually consolidate power: He created a vast network of “clerical commissars” in major public institutions who are empowered to intervene in state matters to enforce his authority. Parliament is currently a weak body dominated by conservatives. The Revolutionary Guards, whose leaders he appoints, are increasingly important to both politics and the economy. His most powerful peers, such as Rafsanjani, have at least temporarily been sidelined.

### **Revolutionary values**

For Khamenei, the 1979 revolution was about ridding Iran of two evils – the shah and the United States – and creating a theocratic government imbued with four core values: justice, independence, self-sufficiency and Islamic piety. These revolutionary ideals continue to dominate Khamenei’s political discourse, and he interweaves them seamlessly: Islam embodies justice. Independence requires self-sufficiency. And foreign powers are hostile to an independent, Islamic Iran.

Khamenei’s vision for a just Islamic society translates as a form of religious socialism. Western governments fail, he argues, because the whims of capitalism and self-interest deny justice to millions. He has championed privatization efforts, yet state subsidies for basic food items and other essentials remain Iran’s chief method of providing economic development and social justice.

### **Four foreign policy themes**

**The United States:** For Khamenei, the Islamic Republic’s top four foreign policy priorities include resistance against the United States and Israel, which he sees as two sides of the same coin. Khamenei believes that Washington aspires to go back to the patron-client relationship with Iran that existed during the Pahlavi monarchy. His primary concern is not a U.S. military invasion, but rather a political and cultural campaign to undermine theocratic rule through a “soft” or “velvet” revolution.

**The peace process:** The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has little impact on the daily lives of Iranians, but Khamenei's contempt for Israel has been remarkably consistent. He has argued that "if Iran stops its support of the Lebanese and Palestinian people [i.e. Hezbollah and Hamas], the United States will also change its hostile attitude toward the Islamic Republic. [But] we consider supporting the Palestinian and Lebanese people one of our major Islamic duties." Arguably, the only way that Khamenei would accept a less strident position toward Israel is when and if the Palestinians themselves accept a peace treaty with Israel.

**Nuclear program:** For Khamenei, the nuclear program has come to embody the revolution's core themes: the struggle for independence, the injustice of foreign powers, the necessity of self-sufficiency, and Islam's high esteem for the sciences. He wants to ensure that Iran is scientifically and technologically advanced enough to be self-sufficient, self-sufficient enough to be economically independent, and economically independent enough to be politically independent.

**Islamic world:** Khamenei envisions Iran as the vanguard of the Islamic world. On his official website, he is referred to as the "Supreme Leader of Muslims." Given Iran's political, cultural and religious influence, he believes none of the critical issues facing the Middle East and Muslim world – Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Persian Gulf security and the Arab-Israeli conflict – can be fully addressed or resolved without Tehran's input.

## Challenges

Khamenei has always been notoriously thin-skinned. Until the 2009 election, public criticism of the supreme leader was one of the few red lines in Iranian politics. It is still a virtual guarantee of a prison sentence. His own family is not above reproach. For years, his younger brother, reformist cleric and former Member of Parliament Hadi Khamenei, has criticized the excessive powers of the supreme leader in newspaper columns and lectures at universities and seminaries – at a price. He has been beaten by vigilantes and disqualified from running again for office.

Khamenei's legitimacy was among the many casualties of the tainted 2009 presidential election. Taboos were shattered when hundreds of thousands of Iranians defied his sermon supporting the outcome and calling for calm; they instead took to the streets of cities throughout Iran chanting "death to the dictator" and "death to Khamenei." Among Iran's pious classes, images of government-sanctioned brutality against civilians further undermined his image as a just spiritual leader. Since then, once-respectful subordinates such as Khatami and Mousavi have openly defied him. His chief rival, Rafsanjani, publicly humiliated as a corrupt traitor by Ahmadinejad, waits in the wings for an opportunity to pounce.

Before the presidential elections, Khamenei appeared to have a lifelong lock on the job of supreme leader. But his fate became far less certain after six months of sporadic turmoil. To regain control, he has grown increasingly reliant on Iran's vast intelligence networks, security forces and military. His future rests most of all in the hands of the Revolutionary Guards. With their apparently strong support, Khamenei has refused to cede any political ground since the election, on the grounds that compromise projects weakness and invites further challenges.

### **Engagement possibilities**

The Obama administration has tried harder than any previous administration to engage Iran, and Khamenei in particular. In his first year, President Obama sent two private letters to Khamenei outlining Washington's genuine interest in overcoming past mistrust and rebuilding relations with Tehran. After the election, Obama also resisted calls to support Tehran's opposition, even as Washington became increasingly critical of Iran's human rights violations.

In response, Khamenei mocked Obama's mantra of change as merely a tactical shift. He said Washington must first change its actions – by lifting sanctions, unfreezing Iranian assets, diluting support for Israel and ceasing criticism of Iran – to show its seriousness. Behind closed doors, however, senior Iranian politicians have conceded that Obama's overtures unsettled Khamenei and put pressure on him to justify Tehran's continued animosity toward the United States.

### **The future**

- Prospects for reconciliation with the United States are low while Khamenei remains in power. At the same time, any engagement policy Iran that aims to ignore or bypass Khamenei is equally unlikely to succeed.
- In both the domestic and international context, Khamenei is averse to compromise under pressure, fearful of projecting weakness and inviting greater pressure.
- Khamenei worries about opposition to his rule among top clerics in Qom, but opposition within the Revolutionary Guards would be far more dangerous for him.
- Khamenei has not appointed an heir apparent and there are no obvious successors, should he die or be removed from power. The supreme leader could be replaced with a *shura* (consultative) council, although the selection of a council could face many problems.

*Karim Sadjadpour is an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of "Reading Khamenei: The Worldview of Iran's Most Powerful Leader."*