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TITLE: Iran's Islamic Republic After Khamenei

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

AUTHOR: Major Giovanni Lanna, Italian Army

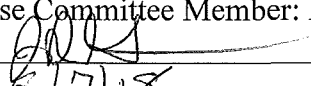
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Executive Summary

Title: Iran's Islamic Republic After Khamenei

Author: Major Giovanni Lanna, Italian Army.

Thesis: Notwithstanding the Iranian precarious socio-economic situation, the Regime will survive the incumbent election of the Supreme Leader choosing a man of the establishment thanks to the prevailing of the *raison d'etat* over the religious and factional stances.

Discussion: For more than thirty years the Islamic Republic of Iran has been on the fringe of the International Community. The storm of the US embassy in Tehran blessed by the Supreme Leader Khomeini in 1979, the eight years long war with Iraq backed by the Western countries in 1980, the inclusion of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the axis of evil by US President George W. Bush in 2002 have driven a wedge between the Islamic Republic and the International Community. Moreover, the street protests that have struck the Country in 1999, and 2009 have reinforced the western assumption that the regime would not last long hampering the clumsy attempts to appease. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic of Iran is more noteworthy than ever. In addition to its considerable oil reserves, Iran enjoys a very strategic geographical position that places it in the middle of several power games. First, Iran is the crossroad of the Chinese New Silk Road, the ambitious project to connect China to Europe. Second, it represents a land-bridge between Russia and the warm water of the Pacific Ocean. Last but not least, it embodies the Indian and Japanese strategy to check the Chinese expansion. Nowadays, the Iranian regime is facing a very complex situation: the elected government is under pressure for the unsuccessful reforms, both social and economic, the appointed Supreme Leader is looking for a smooth succession that will keep alive the revolutionary fervor, the Iranian constitution dictates strict rules for the succession, and the Iranian leadership lacks either internal consensus or a strong figure able to call for a radical change.

Conclusion: The Islamic Republic has showed a Machiavellian inclination toward the *raison d'etat* instead of the Islamic tenets when its own sake is at stake. Notwithstanding all the odds, the advocates of the regime change from within will be disappointed once again, and the regime will survive the succession once more choosing the *raison d'etat* to the Islamic precepts.

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Preface

For almost forty years the International Community has refrained from dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran, considering it a sort of pariah. With the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Islamic Republic has embarked on the path to rejoin the International Community. In the meantime, its importance has grown due to the interest of great powers such as China, Russia, India and Japan in its geographical position.

Notwithstanding, the Western countries have accepted the Islamic Republic in the International Community once again, the Islamic form of government and the Iranian people remain obscure to the wide majority of the western world that has never abandoned the dream of toppling the Islamic Republic via an internal regime change. But the regime has shown a strong survival instinct, and when the regime's survival is at stake, the Islamic tenets give the way to the *raison d'etat*.

Though my name appears as the author of this paper, its realization was possible only thanks to the contribution of many esteemed individuals. I wish to thank the librarians of the Gray Research Center who facilitated my research. For feedback on my writing and suggestion on phrasing, I have been blessed by Stase Wells, Linda Di Desiderio, and Andrea Hamlen of the Leadership Communication Skill Center. Moreover, I wish to thank my wife and my son for moral boost and support. Last but not least, I want to thank Dr. Amin Tarzi for the precious guidance and constant support.

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<p>During the last forty years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been on the fringe of the international scene. Nowadays, due to its geographical position, its oil reserves, and its potential economy, Iran is too important to be ignored. In spite of that, Iran remains obscure for the western countries. It is not a complete democracy, neither an absolute autocracy. Its form of government is a mix of elected structures, unelected religious structures, and parallel structures in constant tension among them. Moreover, the relative power of every position is augmented by the bond of patronage that the individual fitting the position has. Although the Supreme Leader sits at the top of this complex structure, he does not enjoy absolute power but is limited by the popular support. Due to his age and health situation, in the near future, the Supreme Leader will yield his power putting this delicate structure under further stress. Every time the future of the regime has been at stake, the Islamic Republic has given up the Islamic tenets and embraced the raison d'etat in order to survive. Notwithstanding the lack of a charismatic figure able to steer the succession, the Islamic republic will find the way to survive at the cost of its Islamic values.</p>				
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Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) represents a *unicum* in political science. Its democratic process is not complete because the clergy can heavily condition the electoral process and the functioning of the government. It is not an absolute autocracy since the Supreme Leader also finds a limit in the popular support. Finally, despite the other countries in the region, it is not a *praetorian* state because even its most powerful branch of the military apparatus, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), cannot seize the power by itself because a coup against the clerical leadership would countermand “the very ideology on which the Guard’s own legitimacy rests.”¹ Moreover, while the vast majority of the countries in the region fights to reduce the influence of the religious authorities, Iran’s regime tries to assuage its secular component. Essentially, a popularly elected branch and a religious branch compose the government apparatus, and several checks and balances keep these organs in constant tension with each other. Above them, the office of the Supreme Leader is a *deus ex machina* that assures the functioning of the system and wields almost absolute power. Over the years, the competences of the office and its power have increased to compensate the meagre religious credentials, charisma, and support of its holder, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. With tireless work, Khamenei wove a complicate plot of alliances to retain power and marginalize potential opponents.² At the age of 79 and with a bad health situation, he has not yet designated a successor, and the death of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in 2017 eliminated the most probable candidate from the equation. In addition, although the appointment process is codified in the constitution, its outcome is highly unpredictable. Though the process shares many similarities with the conclave, the council that appoints the Pope, the Council of Guardians vets the candidates to the Assembly of

Experts that elects the Supreme Leader before Iranian people choose them. The strict censorship of the Council of Guardians is visible every time the Iranian people are called to express their vote, with the only exception of municipal elections.³ Since Khamenei assumed the Supreme Leader position in 1989, the Council of Guardians has disqualified more than 96% of the presidential candidates each election.⁴ Considering that the Supreme Leader appoints six out of twelve members of the Council of Guardians and that the head of the judiciary branch, also appointed by the Supreme Leader, chooses the other six members, it is plausible to consider the Supreme Leader the man behind the decisions of this powerful organ.

Even so, the Iranian people do not have a marginal role in the life of the authoritarian regime. It was the Iranian people that in 1979 overthrew the Shah's regime, it was the Iranian people that in 1997 shook the regime, electing as president the reformist Khatami over the more powerful Rafsanjani, and it was the Iranian people that in 2009 took to the streets to protest alleged election fraud. In this light, the Council of Guardians' mastery lies in allowing the right amount of dissent to keep the people quiet.

Notwithstanding, this paper will not take into account the recent protests that blew up in December 2017 due to their uncertain aftermath and the unfair press coverage heavily influenced by the regime.⁵

Notwithstanding the precarious Iranian socio-economic situation, the Regime will survive the incumbent election of the Supreme Leader, choosing a man of the establishment thanks to the prevailing of the *raison d'état* over the religious and factional stances.

On the basis that the regime will survive the next succession and that the IRI is too important to be marginalized in the future, this paper will try to analyze all the major factors that could influence the electoral process, the Iranian structure of power, and Khamenei's

appointment process to imagine the rules that would direct the election of the next Supreme Leader. With these rules in mind, it will outline a shortlist of probable candidate and their profiles.

The geopolitical importance of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Skepticism, mistrust, and necessity have characterized the International Community's relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran since the victory of the Islamic revolution in 1979. Skepticism due to the fact that the International Community never understood the Islamic Republic or the Iranian people to the fullest. Mistrust because of mutual betrayals such as the Iranian sponsorship of terrorist organizations or the involvement of the International Community in the Iran-Iraq war. Necessity because Iran is simply too important to be ignored. Its importance mainly rests on three factors: geography, economy, and population.

The Iranian Geography

To fully understand the geography of Iran, it is necessary to analyze its topography and its geo-position. Mountains are the main topographic feature of Iran: the Zagros Mountains



Figure 1 – Iranian Geography

<https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/geopolitics-iran-holding-center-mountain-fortress>

chain protects its western border with Turkey and the northern part of Iraq; the Elburz Mountains run along the southern shore of the Caspian Sea and constitute a mountainous bridge between the Zagros Mountains in the West and the Afghan mountains in the East; these mountains run all along the Iranian border with Afghanistan and Pakistan. The only Iranian borders that are not mountainous are the southwest border with Iraq, which is a swamp plateau, and the southern border that runs along the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. This border confers

to Iran a strategic importance because it allows it to dominate the Strait of Hormuz, one of the most important energy chokepoints, accounting for almost twenty percent of oil traded worldwide.⁶ Two deserts constitute the center of Iran. Due to its peculiar topography, Iran represents a “Mountain Fortress”: a land power defended and contained by its mountains.⁷ As a matter of fact, they constitute a formidable barrier against any invaders but pose a logistical challenge to a westward Iranian expansion. Despite its mountainous topography, Iran is a land chokepoint: its geographical position borders the landlocked Caspian Region with the Indian Ocean and the Western World with the Indian subcontinent through the axis of Turkey-Pakistan-India.⁸

The Iranian Economy

Iran’s geographical position and its hydrocarbon reserves constitute one of the biggest treasures that attract several international interests.

First of all, Iran’s geographical position is paramount for the success of the Chinese “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative. The project consists of connecting China with the Central Asian States and the three states of the Caucasus, a market of more than sixty-five million people.⁹ Moreover, as the collateral effect, the OBOR project is also transforming Iran into an essential partner for China’s competitors and clients: particularly Japan

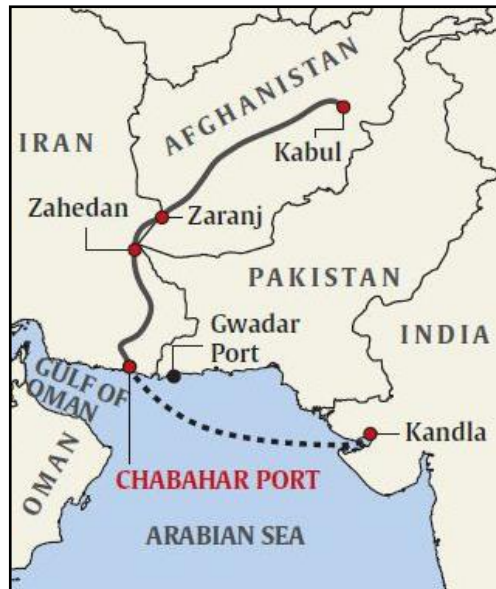


Figure 2 – India’s route to Afghanistan
<http://allinfo.space/2017/12/06/come-chabahar-porta-potrebbe-portare-lindia-e-i-suoi-partner-di-una-nuova-primavera/>.

and India. Both countries are interested in the development of the Iranian deep-water port on the Indian Ocean in Chabahar in order to contrast the Chinese investment in the Pakistani port of Gwadar and access the Central Asian markets. In addition, India is

investing in the port to outflank the Chinese-Pakistani axes and access the Afghan market.¹⁰ On the other hand, the Central Asian States and Russia will rely on the Iranian “land bridge” to have access to the Indian Ocean.¹¹ Furthermore, Iran constitutes an 80 million strong market by itself with the world’s third largest reserves of gas and oil.¹² Currently, mismanagement, corruption, economic sanctions, and mountainous topography that imposes a handicap on the transport connection thwarts the Iranian economy. However, as a result of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action the majority of international sanctions on Iran have been removed. This, coupled with the internal stability in the country, should forecast steady growth of the Iranian economy.¹³

The Iranian society

Politically, three main blocs shape the Iranian society: the clerics, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ related bloc, and the post-revolution bloc. The clerics represent the first generation to come to power during the Revolution and continue to retain major influence over Iranian policy. Notwithstanding internal strident ideological differences, this generation was able to ride the wave of revolution and direct it through the Islamic character that with minor changes still survives today.¹⁴ The very core of the Islamic form of government, the *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist council), created a strict hierarchical system unable to train and foster a new class of political clerics in the long term. Paradoxically, the blind obedience that the doctrine imposes even on high-level clerics discourages the new seminarians from studying the *faqih*, Islamic jurisprudence, to the point that new generations of seminarians are keeping their distance from politics and government and fewer clerics deal with political issues in their courses, as noted by Ayatollah Mohsen Gharavian, one of the most influential clerics in Iran.¹⁵

This trend represents the side effect of the policies that the actual Supreme Leader brought about in the attempt to compensate for his lacking of religious authority. In fact, he tried to rein the clerics through the creation of a huge bureaucratic structure relying on government funds, strict control of the seminaries' *curricula*, and an apparatus capable of employing these mass-produced clerics in every *strata* of the society.¹⁶ In so doing, the Supreme Leader has modified the relationship between the clergy and the Iranian society. The people perceive the clerics as the long arm of the regime, and do not unquestionably follow their advice, but mitigate them with other ideals or values like gender equality, tolerance toward non-Shiites, or human rights.¹⁷ The relation between the clergy and the Iranian population has a paramount importance in a regime that relies on the clerics' legitimization and is on the verge of a critical transition of power with an unclear line of succession. The Supreme Leader is well aware of the threat that this situation represents for the survival of the regime, and in July 2016, appointed one of his most trusted men, Ali Reza Alafi, as the executive director for seminaries nationwide in an attempt to invigorate the clerical role in support of the revolution.¹⁸

The profound crisis experienced by the clerics left room for the IRGC-related group to step into the political realm. Active and former IRGC members compose this group, the Iran-Iraq war strengthened their sense of belonging, and the blood tribute they paid legitimizes their ambition to be the true heirs of the Revolution, calling for the "re-Islamization" of the theocracy.¹⁹ While the 1997 victory of Mohammad Khatami, a middle-rank cleric, over the candidate backed by the clerical establishment constitutes the starting point for the clerics' crisis, the economic and social reforms advanced by Khatami forced the IRGC to step into politics. Since then, the role of the IRGC related group has increased, reaching its peak during the presidency of Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013),

blessed by the support of the Supreme Leader Khamenei. In fact, due to his meagre religious credentials, the middle-rank cleric Khamenei had to coopt the IRGC leaders and other middle rank clerics outside Khomeini's establishment. After the 2009 unrest, the relation has become so symbiotic that Khamenei perceives them as the last resort for putting down domestic discontent.²⁰ Although it appears as a monolithic structure to an external observer, a great variety of different ideological stances, often in open conflict with one another, animates this bloc.²¹ According to the analyst Jerry Guo, an internal government poll conducted on the eve of the contested 2009 election revealed that a high percentage of IRGC members planned to vote for the moderate candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi.²² The purge that the IRGC commander carried out right after the polls unified the group, but the economic possibilities opened by the JCPOA split this bloc again.²³ Moreover, the candidacy of two different candidates, Mahmud Ahmadinejad and Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, to the 2013 presidential election and the presence of a former high-ranking IRGC member in the cabinet of the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, who won against the preferred candidates of the Supreme Leader, testify the heterogeneity of the bloc.²⁴

Young Iranians that did not participate in the revolution or the subsequent Iran-Iraq war compose the post-revolution bloc.²⁵ With 90 percent of the Iranian population under the age of 54, according to the *CIA World Factbook*, and 50 percent under the age of 30, according to a *Carnegie Endowment* study conducted by Richard Cincotta and Karim Sadjapour, this group represents the most numerous part of Iranian society.²⁶ Because of its size and aptitude for challenging the regime, this bloc embodies the expectations of those who think that the Iranian system must inevitably collapse (through regime change) and deserves some additional reflections.

First and foremost, although ideologically multifaceted and complex, economic and social reforms are the main drivers of this bloc.²⁷ While the real driver of the December 2017 protests is still not clear, the students' protests during the Khatami presidency, the 2009 street protest, and the huge turnout during the 2016 presidential election represent a case in point. They were not a failed attempt to subvert the existing regime but sincere participation in the political process with the intent to modernize the intricate, cumbersome, and multilayered structure of power. They were an attempt to put pressure on the regime to reform, and not another revolution with unforeseeable results.²⁸ Moreover, as Iranian youth grow old, they are likely to be less inclined to risk violent confrontation with the regime.²⁹

Secondly, thanks to the demographic reforms carried out by the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in the early '90s, Iran is rapidly going through "demographic windows of opportunity," a period of about five decades in which the labor force grows more rapidly than the rest of the population.³⁰ The window represents an opportunity for the country to provide the needed labor force to expand the economy. It also represents a constraint on the Iranian government. On one hand, it has to adopt reforms aimed at liberalizing the economy and creating new jobs notwithstanding the resistance of the conservatives (the first two blocs). On the other hand, it has to pursue policies of austerity and reform the dysfunctional pension system increasing contributions and scaling back the benefits unpopular with the Iranian youth.³¹ The inherent nature of the Iranian form of government, with its widespread power and centralized control, complicates the resolution of such a tension.

The Iranian form of Government

In sharp contrast with the other authoritarian regimes in the region, the Islamic Republic of Iran did not arise from a military-led coup. It was the result of a popular revolution that toppled the Shah regime. The Republic of Iran owes its Islamic character to the ability of Ayatollah Khomeini to unify a broad alliance of diverse political factions and direct them against the nationalist and pro-American Pahlavi monarchy.³² The first draft of the Iranian constitution did not mention unelected religious organs, and its democratic character was well pronounced.³³ Only in 1981 did Khomeini's supporters succeed in marginalizing or forcing into exile their opponents, and politicized Shiite clerics took the monopoly of the power.³⁴ Thanks to the efforts of the religious nationalists and liberal Islamist forces, the actual Iranian constitution designs a mix of republican and religious institutions that allow a great level of inclusion, although tightly controlled.³⁵

The outcome of the Iranian Revolution does not fit into any one of the pre-existing authoritarian models. It is not a single party regime like the communist model because it has a plethora of parties, is not a praetorian state because its political authority is institutionalized, it is not a one-man dictatorship because, although the Supreme Leader has almost absolute power, below him there are several loosely linked and autonomous power centers. It is not a theocracy because, not the clergy, but a politicized segment of them directs the system.³⁶ According to Hesam Forozan, the Islamic Republic of Iran is an "electoral autocracy" that combines authoritarian institutions legitimized by religion, both parallel religious structures and auxiliary religious-revolutionary structures, with governing state institutions legitimized by the electorate, republican structures.³⁷ Moreover, besides these formal institutions, grounded in the constitution and governmental regulations, informal structures blurred or brightened the inherent power of each position.³⁸

Above these structures, the Supreme Leader sits, legitimized by the religion but also by the electorate through the election of part of the Assembly of the Experts (see Appendix A). Particularly important is the role of elections that are essential to regulate the elite contestations and deter the threat of rebellion.³⁹

Republican Structures

The republican structures are those that derive their legitimacy from the electoral process and are the president, the parliament and the Assembly of the Experts. The 1979 constitution divided the executive branch between the president and the prime minister in order to avoid concentrating too much power in the hands of the president. Within the bipartite system, the duopoly forced the Supreme Leader to arbitrate between the two when they belonged to different parties. In April 1989, the Constitutional Reform Committee abolished the prime minister's office and the president assumed the prime minister's responsibilities. Nowadays, the Iranian people elect the president from candidates vetted by the Council of Guardians, and their choice is confirmed after the election by the Supreme Leader. The president holds exclusively the executive authority, selects the first of his four vice presidents that hold many of the prime minister's responsibilities, and is accountable only to the president. In addition, the president appoints and dismisses ministers that the parliament confirms, and controls the Planning and Budget Organization. The president is a member of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Cultural Revolution, responsible for the cultural and educational issues, and is also the chairman of the National Security Council, entitled to coordinate government activities related to the defense, the intelligence services, and foreign policy. Notwithstanding his position as chairman of the National Security Council, the president is responsible for economic, social, and cultural policies and not for foreign policy. Unlike other presidential republics, the president is

elected by the people but must be confirmed by the Supreme Leader and must follow his directives. Moreover, he is not the commander in chief of the military.

Another republican structure is the parliament. Although the way in which individuals become candidates does not adhere to Western democratic standards because the Council of Guardians vets the candidates, the Iranian parliament possesses a strong dose of vitality. Its fierce opposition to the Council of the Guardians forced the Supreme Leader to create the Expediency Discernment Council with the task to mediate between the parliament and the Council of Guardians. Among most important functions of the parliament are drafting legislation, ratifying international treaties, approving states of emergency, approving the annual budget, and removing the president or the ministers.

The last structure elected by the people is the Assembly of the Experts, a council of eighty-eight clerics that meets two times per year. Its most important task is to appoint the Supreme Leader in the event of succession. Moreover, fifteen of its members form the Committee on Supervision and Investigation whose task is “to monitor and evaluate the Supreme Leader’s performance.”⁴⁰ Among them, three form a special sub-committee in charge of studying qualified candidates to succeed Khamenei. Although inside the Assembly of the Experts, this sub-committee does not report to the chairman of the Assembly but only to Khamenei.⁴¹ Because of its composition and the selection process of its members who must be vetted by the Council of Guardians although elected by the people, this body acts as a parallel religious structure.

Parallel Religious Structures

The parallel religious structures are structures that monitor the activities of the republican structures in order to safeguard the power of the Supreme Leader. These are policy-making organs that fulfill the functions that parties, parliaments, and bureaucracies have in

democracies.⁴² The Council of Guardians is among the most important parallel structures. Its tasks are to verify the compatibility of laws with Islamic Law, working as a parliamentary upper chamber, to act as a quasi-supreme court interpreting the constitution and if agreed by three-fourths the interpretation assumes the same validity of the constitution. In addition, it oversees public referenda and elections for parliament, Assembly of Experts, and president, and examines the qualifications of aspirants for parliament, presidency, and Assembly of Experts evaluating their convictions and loyalty to the regime. Besides its tasks, the peculiar composition of this council makes it an instrument in the hands of the Supreme Leader: he appoints six experts in Islamic Law while the other six non-clerical jurists are elected by the parliament on recommendation of the head of the judiciary that, in turn, is appointed by the Supreme Leader.⁴³

Another parallel structure is the Expediency Council. Founded by the Supreme Leader in 1988 to overcome the stalemate between the parliament and the Council of Guardians, the Expediency Council is composed by thirty-one members from among all different ideological currents. It has two tasks: to advise the Supreme Leader on overall policy and act as a supreme arbiter between the parliament and the Council of Guardians. In this role, the Expediency Council can modify laws without returning the legislation it has changed to any other government body for review.⁴⁴

Auxiliary Religious-Revolutionary Structures

The auxiliary structures are an instrument of control of the regime serving as instruments of mobilization, penetration, and eradication of internal or external enemies. Just as some republican structures can act as parallel structures, some auxiliary structures can evolve

into parallel structures making the distinction between the two categories very nuanced. Some auxiliary structures are not stipulated by the Iranian constitution or law. For instance the Representative of the Supreme Leader, the Association of the Prayer Leaders, Revolutionary Foundations, Special Court for Clergy, Revolutionary Court, and the Press Court. Others are grounded in the constitution or legislation, such as the IRGC and the Law Enforcement Forces.⁴⁵

Among the auxiliary structures, the Revolutionary Foundations are amid the most powerful and the most underestimated organs. Divided into three categories, public, private, and charitable-Islamic, they claim to be nonprofit organizations. They are tax-exempt and accountable only to the Supreme Leader. With unlimited access to state funds, and foreign currency at the official exchange rate, and doing business in a completely uncontrolled manner, they can engage in patronage, mass mobilization, ideological indoctrination, and repression.⁴⁶ Moreover, under the international sanction regime, the foundations have flourished thanks to the lack of international competition.⁴⁷

Appointed by the Supreme Leader personally, the Representatives are Khamenei's men in every important state ministries and institution. Through this system, Khamenei controls ministries in the executive branch, the armed and security forces, the Friday imams, the revolutionary and religious organizations, and the Iranian cultural centers in foreign countries. They are responsible for ideological indoctrinations and implementation of the Supreme Leader's directives.⁴⁸

Last but not least, the most powerful auxiliary structure is the IRGC. Born as a counterweight to the regular military, the IRGC has developed its own Air Force and Navy in addition to its Ground Force and exerts control over the strategic missile and rocket forces, in addition to its own autonomous missile units, and the nuclear program.⁴⁹ In

addition, in the fulfillment of its primary task, the defense of the revolution and its achievements, the IRGC is responsible for the indoctrination of the Iranian population.⁵⁰ Stirring up the threat perception of an internal uprising backed by the West, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has given renewed impetus to this task. The IRGC Commander, Mohammad Ali Jafari, underlined this shift in an interview in 2007 stating that the Supreme Leader has changed the strategic outline of the Guards and that “the main mission of the IRGC from now on is to deal with the threats from the internal enemies.”⁵¹ To strengthen control on Iranian society, the regime has merged the command structure of the IRGC and the Basij.⁵² This paramilitary, all-volunteer, and pro-regime force is another auxiliary structure through which the regime maintains state order and mobilizes the poorer strata of the society. Cheaper than operating a military force, it can be deployed to do the state’s dirty work while providing a certain degree of deniability for its crimes, as happened during the repression of the 2009 uprisings.⁵³

Since Khamenei took office, the IRGC’s power has exponentially expanded in the economic and political arenas. Nowadays, the IRGC dominates the Iranian economy, controlling not less than twenty-five percent of GDP, according to the more optimistic estimates.⁵⁴ Moreover, in reaction to the threat posed by the reformist president Khatami, the IRGC allied with a conservative political faction, the principlists, gaining control of parliament and the presidency from 2000 to 2012. In this way, the IRGC acts as a parallel structure monitoring and balancing the actions of the republican structures.⁵⁵

Informal Structures of Power

In addition to the power that the law confers to each position, every person carries a bond of patronage and loyalty that can increase or dim the power of his office. According to Wilfried Buchta, the structure of informal power inside the intricate Iranian political system

can be depicted as four concentric “rings of power”. At the center there are the patriarchs, the most powerful political clerics. The second ring is composed by high-ranking governmental officials, state functionaries, provincial governors, and administrators. Individuals that control the power base, such as the IRGC, religious foundations, press, and media are part of the third ring. The last ring is composed of individuals that, in the past, played an important role in the system.⁵⁶

The Supreme Leader’s Office

Above this intricate structure of power, the Supreme Leader sits. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, article 5, states that during the occultation of the twelfth Shiite imam, the “just and pious *Faqih*” (religious guide) has the responsibility for the leadership of the *Ummah* (Islamic Community).⁵⁷ Among his powers, stated in the article 110 of the Iranian Constitution, the Supreme Leader is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, can declare war or peace, appoint or dismiss six clerical jurists in the Council of Guardians, the Head of the Judiciary, the president of state radio and television, and the “commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guards, the supreme commander in chief of the security and armed forces.”⁵⁸ Beside these wide range of powers, in its preamble the Constitution specifies that the people have to recognize the *Faqih* as their leader and the Supreme Leader has to prevent the state’s deviation from its Islamic functions.⁵⁹ Notwithstanding the prominent religious character of the IRI, the everyday practices show that the *raison d’etat* takes precedence over religion when its survival is at stake.

For instance, Iran has backed the Christian Armenia against the Shiite Azerbaijan in the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh to push down the Azeri nationalism among the large Iranian-Azeri minority. More overtly, in 1987 the Supreme Leader at the time, Imam Ruhollah Khomeini, declaring the principle of the “Absolute Rule of the Jurist” essentially

stated that his decisions taken in the interest of the Islamic state have precedence over religious rules as response to the conservative led Council of Guardians' attempt to block the left-oriented parliament's activities.⁶⁰ Once more, the Supreme Leader affirmed the supremacy of the reason of state over the religion when, on the eve of the first transition of power between Khomeini and his successor, approved the constitutional changes that separated the highest religious authority from the highest political power in order to overcome an acute crisis of succession.

Khamenei's election

The transition of power in an authoritarian system represents a event and is the time in which the regime is most vulnerable. Thus, in November 1985, allegedly backed by Imam Khomeini, the Assembly of Experts had already identified and officially announced Khomeini's successor in the person of Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, in plain contrast with the Iranian constitution. He was the only loyal follower of the Supreme Leader who met the parameters to become Supreme Leader, established in the 1979 Iranian Constitution, namely to be the most scholarly and honest Shiite legal expert, and "source of emulation."⁶¹ However, in the following years, scandals and disagreements with the Supreme Leader routed Montazeri's political fortune. In 1987, his close follower, Mehdi Hashemi, was imprisoned and executed in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair. In 1989, Montazeri publicly criticized the regime in response to the execution of several proponents of the Islamo-Marxist Iranian People's Mujahedeen Organization (MKO) detained in the country's prisons. Above all, in his four-volume work *Studies on Velayat-e faqih*, in the attempt to define "a theory of government in which Islamic political institutions can only flourish by dint of the clergy's rule," Montazeri criticizes the absolute power of the *velayat-*

e faqih.⁶² He publicly stated that the Islamic Republic had deviated from the original idea of the revolutionaries and calling for a more inclusive political system, he criticized Khomeini for abusing human rights and mistreating Iranians.⁶³ As consequence, the Supreme Leader forced Montazeri to resign from the Office of Successor and assembled a council to revise the constitution. The changes to the constitution sanctioned the separation between the highest religious authority and the highest political authority deleting the title “source of emulation” from the prerequisites to be appointed Supreme Leader. Moreover, the changes stressed the importance of the successor having familiarity with political and social questions.⁶⁴ Only thanks to this realist vision of the council and to the support of Rafsanjani, one of the most influential patriarchs, Khamenei was appointed to the Supreme Leader office although he lacked the religious rank.

The next transition of power

Notwithstanding that the Papacy has an institutionalized and well-oiled mechanism to elect the new Pope, the outcome of such appointment is always lengthy and unpredictable. On the contrary, the mechanism to elect the Supreme Leader has been employed only once, with major changes to the body of laws of the IRI, and an unexpected result. Moreover, unlike Khomeini, who made official the name of his successor well in advance to secure a smooth transition, Khamenei, notwithstanding his age and health situation, has made clear his preference for a successor that shares his revolutionary views but has not yet named anyone.⁶⁵ Although these premises make the succession hardly preordained, analysis of the Iranian political, social, and economic scene dictates some considerations.

First, comparing the Iranian situation in 1989 to the modern day, the election of the next Supreme Leader will likely follow the existing rules. In 1989, a revision of the Iranian

Constitution preceded Khamenei's election to the position of Supreme Leader. The constitutional revision resulted in three main changes. First, the council appointed to revise the constitution deleted the article that took into account the election of a council whereas nobody possessed the requirements to be appointed as Supreme Leader.⁶⁶ Second, the council sanctioned the separation of the Iranian highest political position from the highest Shiite authority, removing the title of *marja'-e taqlid* as requirement for the position of Supreme Leader.⁶⁷ Last but not least, the council added the adjective "absolute" to the power of the Supreme Leader.⁶⁸ The constitutional reform succeeded also because two founding fathers of the revolution strongly backed it: the Supreme Leader Khomeini who asked for the revision and firmly supported it, and Rafsanjani who worked on it and when Khomeini passed away, influenced the Assembly of Experts, telling them that before dying, Khomeini told him that his successor would be Khamenei. At that time the Iranian situation was very different from the current situation in Iran. First, the clergy were very powerful. Rohullah Khomeini was a *marja'-e taqlid-e motlaq*, the highest rank in the Shiite theological hierarchy (see Appendix B), and people referred to him as *Imam* that in the Shiite belief means chosen by God and thus without sin and infallible.⁶⁹ Rohullah Khomeini's religious rank conferred him an undisputed authority and he could still claim credit for the success of the revolution. Second, the Iranian nationalistic sentiment and the unity of the Nation was at a climax as a consequence of the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988. Last but not least, the regime experienced a minimum internal dissent as result of the opposition's purges following the MKO attempt to invade Iran from their bases in Iraq in 1988.⁷⁰

Today, all these conditions have expired. First, the clergy's power is experiencing a profound crisis. Before being appointed Supreme Leader, Khamenei's religious rank was

hojjatoleslam, a mid-level title in the religious hierarchy. The Assembly of Experts raised his rank overnight to the level of Ayatollah in order to grant him the authority to issue *fatwa*.⁷¹ The result of this political promotion is that the majority of the Shiite clergy in Iran doubts Khamenei's religious credentials.⁷² In addition, with the death of Rafsanjani in January 2017, the regime lacks prestigious figures that can strongly influence the election. Also the clergy as a whole does not possess the same appeal for the Iranian society. As foreseen by Ayatollah Montazeri, the heavy institutionalization of the clergy has compromised its bond with the believers.⁷³ Second, forty years of economic shortage and high social inequality are putting national unity to a severe test. Third, as consequence of the above, internal dissent is at its climax. Hence, under these circumstances, another constitutional reform to secure the succession seems highly improbable.

Secondly, notwithstanding its paramount power, the IRGC will unlikely overthrow the Islamic regime and take the power autonomously. During the last thirty years, the IRGC has extended his influence in all the realms of Iranian life. The American presence in Afghanistan and Iraq represents a major concern for the Iranian military apparatus, especially the IRGC, which is mainly concerned about a direct invasion or a “colored revolution” backed by the West. To counter this threat, the IRGC Commander, Mohammad Ali Jafari, developed and implemented the “Mosaic Defense.”⁷⁴ Basically, the IRGC adopted a highly decentralized command and control structure establishing a provincial command in every province, embraced asymmetric warfare as primary doctrine, and improved cooperation between IRGC units and the Basij.⁷⁵ In addition, thanks to the Basij's role in the Iranian universities, the IRGC control the social life of the nation. The IRGC exerts also a paramount control over the Iranian economy through Revolutionary Foundations and firms. Lastly, since 1998, it plays a role in the Iranian politics with former

IRGC members elected in parliament and appointed as ministers. Although the IRGC is a big player on the Iranian scene, it is still not an autonomous one. Among its weak points are the ideological indoctrination that instills in its members a blind faith in the Supreme Leader, the legitimization of its power that still stems from the clergy, and the consciousness of its dependence on the technocrats to keep the machinery of the government running.⁷⁶ These weaknesses allow the IRGC to say a word in the succession process but unlikely to seize the power independently by the clergy. With these assumptions, the option of a praetorian turn is very remote.

Thirdly, the Iranian people elected the Assembly of the Experts in 2016. Although the Council of Guardians scrutinized all the candidates, a close ally of Khamenei chairs the Assembly, and the death of Rafsanjani has weakened the voice of the technocrats and of the overall assembly. According to international commentators the reformists dominate the assembly. The death of Khamenei, weakening the conservative side, could unleash the moderates inside the assembly.

Fourthly, it has been two years since Khamenei bluntly spelled out his possible abdication and since then nothing happened. During a speech in Qom in 2016, right before the Assembly of Experts' election, the Supreme Leader emphasized the importance of the Assembly in electing the new Supreme Leader and spoke about "the day the current leader is not in the world or is not the leader anymore."⁷⁷ This sentence led to speculation about Khamenei's possible designation of his successor and also ceding him some authorities before Khamenei's death to ensure the protection of his legacy.

Lastly, everybody favors a serene transition. Wrapping up the dictates of the constitution, when the time comes, the Assembly of the Experts will likely elect an individual, with religious qualifications, and familiarity with political and social questions.

In addition, the Assembly will likely elect the Supreme Leader from its members and preferably someone young so that he could ensure a long time of stability.⁷⁸

Given these assumptions, eight candidates comprise a probable shortlist. Hassan Rouhani (b. 1948) has been part of the regime establishment from the very beginning and a tireless defender of the Islamic Revolution.⁷⁹ He was at Ayatollah Khomeini's side in Paris before the revolution began. Moreover, he held command roles during the Iran-Iraq war.⁸⁰ His political résumé is similar to the political experience that Khamenei had before becoming Supreme Leader, and in the last election of the Assembly of Experts he gained the third largest number of votes in the constituency of Tehran.⁸¹ Thanks to the mediation of his mentor Rafsanjani, since 2013 he has won the favor of the reformists and gained a wide support of the population. In the dance to reduce the IRGC influence over the Iranian economy, Rouhani made them several concessions by appointing members of the IRGC to governmental position, increasing the IRGC budget, and assigning them the leading role in the development activities of the country's border regions with Iraq and Afghanistan. Also, he is closer than ever to the Supreme Leader. International commentators are divided about his chances of seizing power. Some sustain that in order to have a smooth transition and, thanks to his last actions, the IRGC would consider his appointment acceptable.⁸² On the other hand, several commentators think that due to his reformist ideas, the IRGC still distrusts Rouhani and his appointment is unlikely.⁸³

Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani (b. 1961) is another possible candidate. He was born in Najaf, Iraq. His father left Iran because he opposed the Shah. His family is very powerful in Iranian politics and he can count on the support of his four brothers that also have prominent role in the politics: Mohammad-Javad is a top adviser of the Supreme Leader and secretary of the high council for human rights of the judiciary branch, Bagher is a

doctor and served as deputy minister of health, Fazel is a physicist and served as cultural attaché in Ottawa, Canada, and Ali is the incumbent speaker of parliament a former commander of the IRGC with which he still maintains ties, and very close to the Supreme Leader.⁸⁴ In 2009, Khamenei appointed Sadeq Head of the Judiciary. Although he possesses impeccable religious credentials, he never claimed the status of Grand Ayatollah in order to not challenge the authority of Khamenei, and showed him deference. Moreover, he is a member of the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers' extreme right wing and his outlook is decidedly anti-Western. Thanks to his zero-tolerance policy toward dissidents and his heavy-handed management of the 2009 protests, he has the favor of the IRGC. The only spot on his resumé is the involvement of his family in scandals due to corruption.⁸⁵

Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi (b. 1948) was born in Iraq (Karbala) and is an Iraqi who speaks Persian with an Arabic accent.⁸⁶ He has a close relationship with Khamenei, who appointed him Head of the Judiciary from 1999 to 2009. Notwithstanding his anti-American sentiments, scholars consider him a moderate conservative.⁸⁷ Considering himself a *sayyid*, descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, and having claimed the *marjaiya* in 2010, Shahroudi can boast about impressive religious credentials. His religious authority goes beyond the Iranian borders, also exerting a huge influence in Iraq and Bahrain.⁸⁸ In 2011, he opened an office in Najaf, Iraq, inspiring speculation about his designs on succeeding the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani (b. 1930), the highest religious figure in the Shiite world.⁸⁹ If Shahroudi will be successful in succeeding both Khamenei and Sistani, he would concentrate again in one person the highest political role in Iran and the highest religious position in the Shiite world. Moreover, he possesses high level political experience and ties to both reformists and Ahmadinejad. His biggest detriments are that his Arabic accent could be difficult to sell to the highly nationalistic Iranian

population, he has no support among the military and the IRGC considers him unreliable, and, his attempt to start a group rival to the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers damaged his relationship with the seminary.⁹⁰

Ebrahim Raisi (b. 1960) allegedly has the favor of Khamenei. He is a close friend of Khamenei's son, Mojtaba, and Khamenei appointed him to the Head of Astan Quds Razavi (Shrine of Imam Reza), a massive charity organization in Mashad, controlled by the office of the Supreme Leader. He is a *sayyid* and has high esteem inside the Assembly of the Experts where serves as secretary of the committee that oversees the Supreme Leader. His resumé boasts a role in the 1988 mass execution of political prisoners that won him consensus among the IRGC and membership inside the extremist faction of the Combat Clergy Association, a very conservative political group. On the other hand, Raisi has not political experience and was never a member of the Council of Guardians or the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers. Moreover, he has a mediocre religious resumé. His defeat in the 2017 presidential election against Rouhani testifies a meager popular support.⁹¹ Nevertheless, he has the favor of Khamenei who tried to create his political resumé nominating him for the presidency and, thanks to the charity organization, gave him the possibility to win popular support by providing food to the poor and hosting pilgrims using the charity resources.⁹²

Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati (b. 1927) is another hard-liner and probable candidate to the succession. In 2016, he was narrowly elected to the Assembly of the Experts. Nonetheless, he was appointed Chairman of the Assembly with wide support. Along with Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, he inspires Ahmadinejad.⁹³ He is a strong supporter of the Supreme Leader, to the point that he declared that the role of the Assembly is “the consolidation of Supreme Leader’s position.”⁹⁴ Even so, his poor performance in

the last Assembly election testifies his poor popular support and implies that he cannot assure an untroubled succession.

Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi (b. 1935), along with Jannati, is the most radical proponent of the clergy. He profoundly does not believe in democracy.⁹⁵ He is the mentor of Ahmadinejad and founder of the ultra-radical Shiite school *Haghani*. His exclusion from the Assembly of the Experts has reduced his chances to become Supreme Leader.

Hassan Khomeini (b. 1972) is not one of the main candidates but must be taken in consideration because his lineage. Grandson of the first Supreme Leader and father of the Revolution, his election is unlikely for two main reasons. First, he is not a member of the Assembly of Experts. Second and foremost, his reformist ideas have alienated him from the IRGC to the point that it openly humiliated Hassan during a grand memorial held to honor the passing of the father of the revolution in 2010.⁹⁶

Mojtaba Khamenei's role (b. 1969) inside the Iranian politics has constantly grown since 2005. Reportedly, his role in unleashing the Basij crashing the 2009 protest was crucial and won him the favor of the IRGC to the point that some commentators believe that the Supreme Leader was maneuvering to facilitate the appointment of his son to the position of Supreme Leader.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, his chances to be appointed Supreme Leader are few. He is not a member of the Assembly and the nature of the regime that was born to oppose the monarchy of the Shah is averse to passing on power based on blood ties.⁹⁸

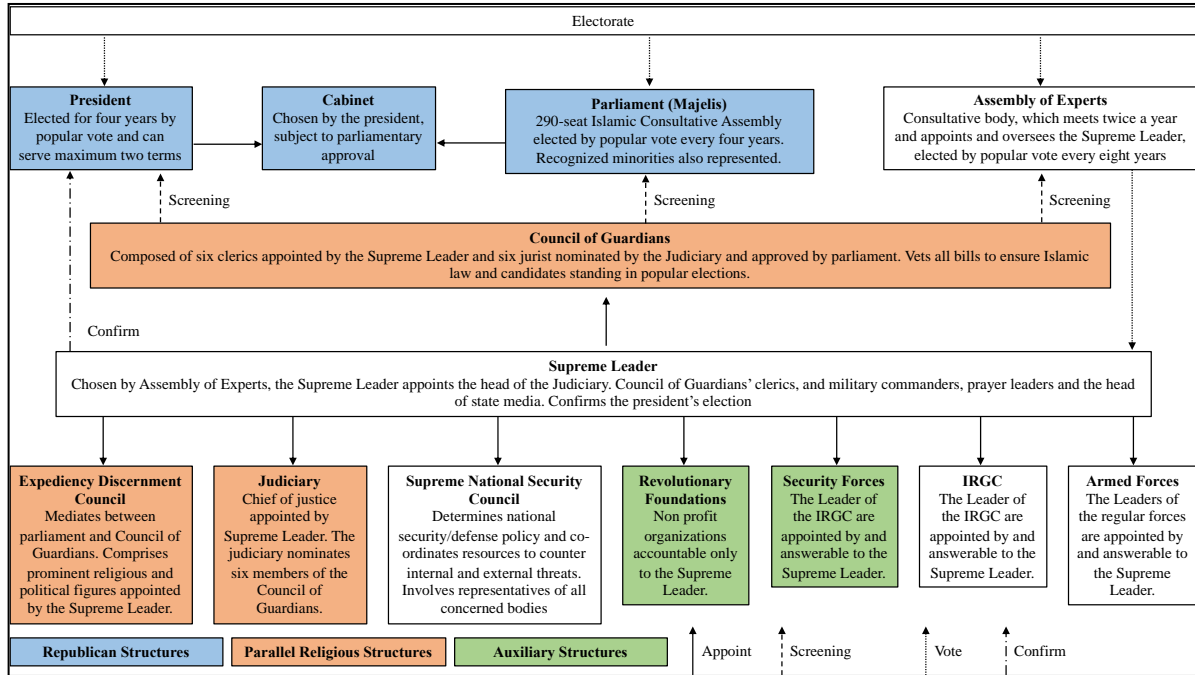
Conclusion

In March 2013, with an unexpected decision, the Conclave elected the Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the 266th Pope. Notwithstanding the long history of the Papacy, the

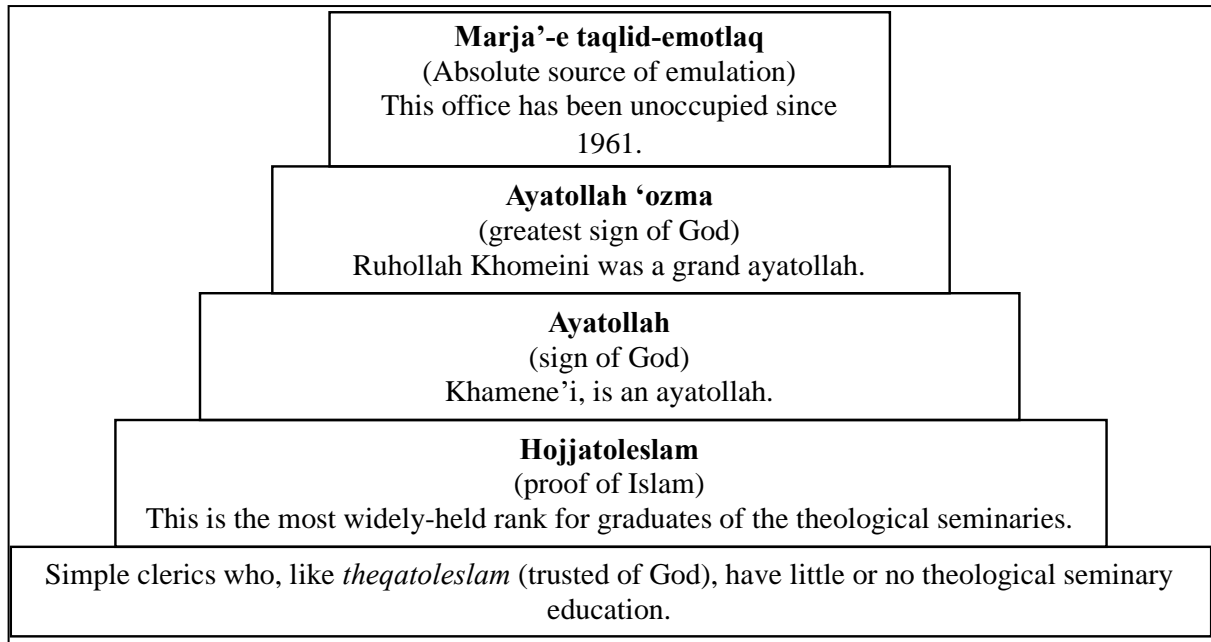
election of Cardinal Bergoglio was a complete and astonishing surprise. The election of the Supreme Leader has a much shorter history, and although the first Supreme Leader Khomeini planned the succession well in advance, nothing went as planned. The designated successor harshly and publicly contested the Supreme Leader and was removed, the established rules could not assure a smooth transition and required changes, and the chosen Supreme Leader had neither charisma nor religious credential. Notwithstanding all the odds, the primacy of the *raison d'etat* over the religion ensured the survival of the regime.

The next succession to the position of the Supreme Leader will not be less complex: the death of Rafsanjani eliminated the most probable candidate, Khamenei has not yet designated a successor, and the Iranian society is more divided than ever. Notwithstanding all the odd, the *raison d'etat* will prevail once more and the regime will survive again.

Appendix A: The Structure of Government



Appendix B: The Theological Hierarchy of the Shiite Clergy in Iran



(source: Wilfred Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*, (Washington D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), 54.)

Notes

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