

A Long View on Iran: Inheriting Khamenei

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September 23, 2014

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has recently undergone a prostate cancer operation. Iranian authorities were at pains to paint his health troubles as just routine difficulties anyone may experience. He himself has assured Iranians that there was no reason for concern and that the operation was a “normal procedure.” But whatever the severity of the Supreme Leader’s condition, serious questions arise about the future of the Islamic Republic should he depart from the scene. Most importantly, it is necessary to know what the new Supreme Leader will face as he occupies the post the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini devised to lead the Iranian Revolution.



Ayatollah Khamenei on his hospital bed being visited by President Hasan Rouhani

Iran’s Domestic Challenges

As leader of the revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded in creating a conservative, ideologically-pure state governed by clerics and honed by their Shiite dogma. Heir to this legacy, Ayatollah

Khamenei had no recourse, even if he had chosen to, but to follow closely the strait path charted and consecrated in the Khomeini-supervised Islamic constitution of the republic. Since 1989 when he was elected Supreme Leader, he has consistently leaned rightward and sided with the conservatives on essential elements of ideology and social policy and the myriad areas of foreign policy that he supervises and minutely controls. Indeed, Khamenei has proven to be an excellent successor to Khomeini and has shown a steady hand both immediately after the end of the Cold War and in steering the Islamic Republic in a conservative direction.

Going forward, and continuing to face serious domestic and international challenges, Iran is in need of deciding quickly who among its geriatric clergy can steer it through turbulent and treacherous waters into which Khamenei has waded.

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Absent that, Iran must speedily anoint a potential successor with the clout and legitimacy necessary for the post. But this decision is fraught with uncertainties born out of the inescapable cycle of domestic social development, which is itself a product of the interaction of economic and political circumstances, some domestic and others international.

Importantly, the new leader will have to be adroit enough to manage the differences of the conservative–reformer divide on social

policy such as birth control, the mixing between the sexes, attire, and other facets of life. The election of Hasan Rouhani in 2013 was the clearest manifestation of a society seeking freedoms –of the press, social media, behavior, and others- that have been circumscribed by authorities. But what has become evidently clear since his election is that the organs of the Islamic Republic are not amenable to social changes for a while to come.

However, this will likely help the flourishing underground liberal currents that have existed for a long time in Iran, and cement a greater degree of discontent that could spread to other facets of economic and political life. Moreover, the conservative state apparatus that succeeded in 2009 in suppressing the reformist movement after that year's presidential elections may not find it as easy this time around, now that Iran is increasingly subjected to international public scrutiny as it seeks an accommodation regarding its nuclear program.



Khamenei surrounded by IRGC commanders

The putative leader will also have to contend with the reality of the expanding economic role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and its concomitant political clout. The IRGC has its hand in telecommunications,

consumer goods, energy, and construction –controlling the construction giant Khatem al-Anbia with its 800 subsidiaries and 200,000 employees. It has also benefited handsomely from privatization schemes totaling US\$120 billion. It and its Basij force use their economic clout as means of asserting themselves in all aspects of policy, especially in the military and foreign arenas, and they have been a force in deciding elections and political coalitions. Some have actually speculated that the Supreme Leader Khamenei may not necessarily control the Guards but may in fact be beholden to them and to their interests. Subsequently, any new leader will have to either continue a cordial relation with them or try to limit their influence and thus expose the entire system to unwanted shocks that will weaken it.

Khamenei's replacement will also have to cater to the interests of a rising middle class that links its wellbeing to an openness on the international community, a prospect mostly dependent upon the outcome of the ongoing nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1. Indeed, as Iran gears up to the lifting of sanctions, at least partially, many international companies are eager to enter the Iranian market and exploit possible opportunities. Additionally, while the merchant class, concentrated in the bazaaris in major cities, has refrained from publicly objecting to clerical rule and policies leading to international economic ostracism, it cannot be mollified endlessly and will one day express its displeasures and possibly fund credible alternatives. It is likely that the combination of opposing demands from different economic actors will make or break the choice of the future leader, the strength of the clerical state and the legitimacy of the regime notwithstanding.

Foreign Policy Adventures and Contingencies

As both supervisor and initiator of foreign policy decisions, the position of Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution will in short order be subjected to myriad issues confronting Iranian foreign policy and its endless entanglements. He indeed will have

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to 'hit the ground running' in addressing the legacy that would land in his lap. First, Iran has to both accommodate the international community's demands and accept what would be a very bitter pill to swallow; otherwise remain in purgatory for a decidedly long time to come. The gap separating the Islamic Republic from its P5+1 interlocutors is a chasm containing differences about numbers of centrifuges and their types, closing, or modifying the purpose of, important nuclear sites, the duration of any potential agreement (Iran wants it to be very short while the P5+1 wants it very long), enrichment levels, delivery systems and missiles, and others. As Iran insists on its right to developing peaceful nuclear energy, the international community will in parallel fashion insist on clear-cut commitments that may very well eviscerate any claims to the independent production of such energy. A future Supreme Leader will have to make the decision to accommodate what are seen as humiliating demands -and thus shake the foundations of the regime- or reject unacceptable dictates -thus sentencing his

country to continued sanctions, isolation, and economic collapse.

Second, Iran has committed itself to an unchanged course of supporting a very unpopular Syrian regime and has invested its own resources and those of its allies and creations in propping it up. While such commitment is strategic and essential for the long-term goal of a *pax Iranica* extending to the Mediterranean, it is not unfathomable that it also is Ayatollah Khamenei's personal preference and policy directive that could not simply be undone by a change of mind on his part. Iran today finds itself playing a decisive role in Syria; one that merely supports a minority Alawite regime that could be taken as a Shiite one. In other words, and besides the strategic service a Syrian regime may provide should it survive, Iran's support of Bashar al-Asad comes off as a sectarian stance that pits Damascus and Tehran against the overwhelming majority of Syrians, the peoples of the Middle East, and most in the international community. Indeed, a new Supreme Leader may possess a strategic opportunity to cut Asad loose in the hope that Iran may re-integrate itself at least in its Middle Eastern environment.

Third, Iran could not be happy with the strategic snub it received as the US-led international effort to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria got under way. Both the Jeddah meeting and the Paris conference avoided any reference to Iran's possible participation against ISIS, specifically because of the Iranian stance in Syria and refusal to give Tehran the opportunity to ingratiate itself with the international community. In response, Iran chose to increase its surreptitious military presence by sending more IRGC soldiers to Iraq and to rely on a smattering of friendly Iraqi militias

operating as a Shiite spearhead against the jihadist Sunni ISIS, in the process affirming the sectarian nature of Iran's foreign policy. A new Supreme Leader would indeed be hard pressed to change Iran's lot with the regional and international communities so that Iran can be trusted to play a constructive role in the Middle East.

Fourth, the Islamic Republic has a dominant role in Lebanon through its proxy Hezbollah and is accused of supporting the destructive policies pursued by the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Needless to say, both parties are pillars of Iran's coveted tutelage over the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. While Hezbollah throttles any movement toward asserting the Lebanese state's sovereignty over its territories and has committed itself to the survival of the Syrian regime, it has also prevented the election of a Lebanese president who would assure institutional longevity and legitimacy. Without Iran's military and monetary support, the Party of God would not be able to hold the country hostage to an ill-advised involvement in Syria or to expose it to the vagaries and repercussions of the Syrian crisis.

In Yemen, the Houthis have finally usurped state power in a large swath of the country and taken over the capital Sanaa, in a move reminiscent to Hezbollah's putsch in Beirut in 2008. Yemeni President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi has basically conceded al-Houthis' victory in forcing a new status quo. As they have demanded for a while now, they will be at the center of decision-making and are likely to get a corridor from their areas north of the country to the Red Sea to assure themselves external material support and, some credibly argue, allow for their secession and the establishment of what is feared would be an Iranian-friendly regime on Saudi

Arabia's southwestern border. In both the Lebanese and the Yemeni cases, a new Iranian Supreme Leader would have the chance to pull back from the confrontational foreign policy Ayatollah Khamenei has designed.



Abdul-Malek al-Houthi speaks to jubilant supporters via giant TV screen after Sanaa takeover

Fifth, and lastly, a new Supreme Leader has the essential task of re-integrating Iran in its Arabian Gulf environment. An important first step would be to declare Iran's final and unchangeable commitment to the independence and territorial integrity of Bahrain, whatever irredentist sentiments there exist in Tehran. Concomitantly, Iran has to cease to interfere in the troubled relations between the Bahraini state and its Shiite citizens and let gradual change in Manama take its own course. Another would be a general thawing of relations with Saudi Arabia, itself made more possible by ceasing to interfere in Bahrain and Yemen, not to mention Iraq and Syria. And yet one more would be to find an amicable solution to the Iranian occupation of the three islands claimed by the United Arab Emirates, Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs.

Conclusion

The illness of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei may very well be a great opportunity for Iran to re-integrate itself in the regional and international environments. The future of

both domestic and international issues is on the line and for the foreseeable future. As the Islamic Republic matures after 35 years of revolution, its new Supreme Leader will have to choose between two very distinct and opposite pathways.

He can declare that Iran *needs* to be part of the international community of nations, is ready to abide by its norms and mores, and wants to participate in bringing peace and stability to its immediate environs. Such a course will at least launch Iran on a path of normalcy in its relations with other nations and assure it a place and role in its region and around the world. Granted, such a path could put the new Supreme Leader at odds with established conservative centers of power, most notably the IRGC and the Guardian Council, the most influential institution in the clerical state. But if history is any lesson, he most likely will be able to use his unparalleled power and legitimacy to contain them, just as Khamenei before him sidelined moderate and liberal presidents and their administrations since the early 1990s in the name of the Revolution.

Alternatively, the new Supreme Leader could just continue to dig in conservatism's heels to the detriment of the Islamic Republic's future. There obviously are many clerics who are spoiling to be given the chance to show the world just how much more conservative domestically and ornery internationally Iran can be. But any of them will continue to face the same vexing questions that confront the Islamic Republic today about its domestic development and its relations with the region and the world.

*The views expressed are not necessarily
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Images accessed 9/24/2014

Ayatollah Khamenei in hospital

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/09/20/ayatollah-khamenei-s-cancer-scare.html>

Khamenei and IRGC commanders

<http://www.frontpagemag.com/2014/majid-rafizadeh/the-military-empire-of-irans-revolutionary-guard-corps/>

Abdel-Malek al-Houthi in Yemen

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29338034>