

**“SUCCESSION IN IRAN:
WHO WILL BE THE NEXT SUPREME LEADER?”
SUMMARY OF A WEBINAR HELD BY AGSIW**



22 SEPTEMBER 2022



OVERVIEW

Since his rise to power, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has survived all rumours of his ill health and death. Most recently, media reports indicated that Khamenei was “gravely ill” and “understood to be on his death bed.”

However, he made a sudden reappearance, standing without his usual walking stick, and delivered a seven-minute address to a group of students commemorating ‘Arbain’ - a major Shia religious holiday.

The 83-year-old Khamenei assumed Iran’s top religious, political, and military authority in 1989 and is the final arbiter on all key issues like the nuclear deal, which is currently being negotiated with the United States.

In a webinar hosted by the ‘Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington’ (AGSIW) and moderated by Hussein Ibish, Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow [and the author of *Political Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Demise of the Clergy and the Rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (2020)] speculated around the topic especially as Iran was facing new and unprecedented challenges following the murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini by the so-called ‘Morality Police’.

KEY COMMENTS MADE BY ALI ALFONEH

- Events of recent weeks when it was reported that Khamenei was sick and hospitalized had caused a serious problem because of the importance of the institution of leadership (i.e., Supreme Leader) in the Islamic Republic.
- Given the fact that the issue of succession has not been officially dealt with and no successor has been named, the death of Khamenei in these circumstances could lead to a situation of crisis.
- There are constitutional guidelines in place for designating the next Supreme via the 88-man Assembly of Experts. In the event of the death of the Supreme Leader, a ‘Council of 3’ consisting of the President, Head of the Judiciary and the most senior member of the Assembly of

Experts, will be in charge of carrying out the duties of the Supreme Leader until a successor has been named.

- There are serious ambiguities about the qualification of any Supreme Leader (e.g., that he should be pious and have administrative capabilities – attributes that are difficult to gauge).
- Indeed, at the time of his succession, the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei did not live up to the kind of qualifications specified in the constitution. So, what transpired was that he was made temporary Leader at the start until such time that the constitution was changed.
- Difference between now and 1980 when Ayatollah Khomeini died (with people like Hashemi Rafsanjani, Moussave Ardabili and Ali Khamenei in collusion with Khomeini's son Ahmad) engineered the new leadership, was the absence of the military or in more specific terms the IRGC – an organization that over the past 3 decades has been gradually brought by Khamenei into the centre fold of Iranian politics.
- This time, the role of the IRGC is crucial, given that it will call the shots while shielding itself from direct scrutiny or direct contact with the public by having a cleric in place as the Supreme Leader.
- However, it is important to note that the IRGC is not a homogeneous entity and is itself factionalized between elements with religious, world-wide and economic interests who each have and pursue a different agenda.
- These interests have at times collided in the past. A notable example of this is when the economic sector of the IRGC did not wish to expand its economic activities in the province of 'Sistan & Baluchistan' because of economic considerations, only to be forced to do so by the more politically and security minded sectors of the IRGC.
- However, there is no question at this juncture, in face of any existential threats, all factions within the IRGC are likely to unify and stick together.
- On issues such as JCPOA, it is generally believed that the IRGC would prefer for Iran to become a nuclear power, though at the same time it is crucial to note that at the time, it did not veto the 2015 JCPOA agreement because the lifting of sanctions only helped the promotion of the IRGC's economic empire within Iran through foreign direct investments and the like.

PERIPHERAL ISSUES

- The death of Soleimani has not weakened the Quds Force in the way that the death of Mohandas has resulted in notable weaknesses of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq.

- The only noticeable change in the Quds Force since the death of Soleimani is that it once again operates in the shadows and in complete secrecy (unlike Soleimani in his latter years).
- While the IRGC genuinely believes that it has won in Syria (irrespective of what anyone might say or do as in the case of relentless Israeli aerial attacks), it does at the same time encourage the continuation of dialogue with countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia and is generally pleased that the UAE and Kuwaiti Ambassadors are once again being sent back to Tehran.
- On the subject of the ongoing protests and crackdown, the authorities have in the past been confronted with two kind of protests:
 - 1. People protesting for economic reasons
 - 2. People (especially the middle classes) protesting for various freedoms etc.
- Seldom in the past have these two acted together. The last time when such a situation took place was at the time of the 2009 Green Revolution.
- The current demonstrations today is something along the lines of 2009.
- The only way that these protests can continue and progress to a higher stage is if the infrastructure of repression which the Islamic Republic has constructed over the years fails to work – i.e., if the soldiers/IRGC personnel/police/Basij fail to obey orders.
- This is not a scenario that is expected to unfold at this time and the general belief is that the current protests will most likely be brutally dealt with and quashed.

