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## *'Ali Khamene'i: Iran's Most Powerful Man*

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### Contents

Iran's "Black Box" Policy Process	2
'Ali Khamene'i: Iran's Anxious Leader	4
Khamene'i's Political Preferences and Constraints	6

### Executive Summary

*As the nuclear standoff with Iran runs into its sixth year, prospects for a compromise deal remains as remote as ever. The UN Security Council is preparing to implement the third set of sanctions against Tehran for non-compliance with its previous resolutions. In the meantime, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad has dismissed Resolution 1803 as "invalid" and declared Iran's nuclear dossier at the UN a closed case. Still, despite a sense of dejection among Western officials, the likelihood that Ahmadinejad and his far right political base in Iran can be outflanked at home over this issue is a real possibility. For this scenario to materialize, the key is to influence the perceptions and preferences of Iran's top authority, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i. That, however, will not be a simple task, as even this officially all-powerful figure has his own political and personal insecurities which are a major contributor to policy disorientation in Tehran.*

## About the Author



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On January 3, 2008, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i once again sought to remind domestic and foreign audiences about his stature in Tehran. Stating that "cutting off relations with the US" was one of the "principal policies" of the Iranian government, but that he would be the "first person to endorse these relations" if it benefited the Iranian people, Khamene'i secured news headlines.<sup>1</sup>

In a time of heightened Western anxiety about Iran's activities and policies in the Middle East, it is the radical statements of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad that have captured the world's focus. Although Ahmadinejad has proven to be an imposing president with a resilient taste for populism and extremism, in Iran's peculiar and complex political institutional arrangement, the presidency is not the primary driver of Tehran's relations with the outside world.

The most powerful political role is vested in the Office of the Supreme Leader, a dominance that extends to the realm of foreign policy and is central to the attainment of the strategic foreign policy objectives of the Islamist government, including the handling of relations with Washington. The personal aspirations of 'Ali Khamene'i, the current supreme leader, are therefore arguably one of the best indicators of Tehran's foreign policy behavior and goals in the immediate future.

Still, while Khamene'i is the final arbiter in Iran's foreign policy deliberations, he is not only exposed to but is primarily led by internal pressures and external demands. The pressures that Khamene'i faces are to a significant extent related to his political rise and present status and authority within the regime. Accordingly, he remains preoccupied with maintaining the greatest possible control over policy debates and warding off attempts to diminish his powers.

In the realm of foreign policy, Khamene'i's appointments and interventions are in the main neither hawkish nor ideologically-driven but intended to preserve the equilibrium that exists among Iran's major political groupings.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the US-Iran standoff, while Khamene'i reigns over a populace that is perhaps the most pro-American in the Islamic world<sup>3</sup> he sees a process of rapprochement with Washington as inherently dangerous and one that is likely to bring about the downfall of the Islamist political system. His January 3 remarks about relations with the US were intended to convey the message to his Iranian and foreign detractors that they not underestimate him and his political sway at a time of growing calls in both Tehran and Washington for a resumption of diplomatic ties.

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1. Khamene'i stated this in a speech on January 3, 2008 in the city of Yazd. The speech was broadcast by the Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tehran, in Persian.

2. At the present, the three most distinct and influential factions are the reformists (most notably including former President Mohammed Khatami and former speaker of parliament, Mehdi Karroubi); the so-called traditionalist conservatives (including former President 'Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani; Mohsen Rezai, the long-time head of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC); Mohammed Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran and 'Ali Larijani, the former head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council), and the far right (neo-Islamists) who largely gather around and are supportive of the policies of President Ahmadinejad. Both Qalibaf and Larijani are expected to contest the 2009 presidential elections.

3. According to Terror Free Tomorrow ([www.terrorfreetomorrow.org](http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org)), the people of Iran and Bangladesh have the most favorable opinion of the United States in any Muslim-majority country.



### Factions and Khamene'i

Article 26 of Iran's constitution enables the "formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognised religious minorities ... provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic." A 1981 law on political parties specified what a political party is and defined the conditions under which it could operate, and it made the formation of a party dependent on getting a permit from the Interior Ministry.

From 1979 through to 1997, candidates from two broad Islamist factions were effectively the only available alternatives to the Iranian electorate in the highly constrained elections that take place in the country. The Left was made up of those among the clergy who emphasized the need for social justice and welfare, wealth distribution, and the large role the state had to play in providing economic opportunities to the people. The Right was the clerical faction and its mercantile backers who backed limiting the role of the state and advocated protection of private property and were more inclined to see benefits from engaging and integrating with the outside world.

Both wings supported the role of the supreme jurist while Ayatollah Khomeini was alive. Prior to becoming supreme leader in 1989, Khamene'i was largely identified with the Left. However, by mid-1990s, as the Left split into traditionalist and modernist wings with the latter

### IRAN'S "BLACK BOX" POLICY PROCESS

Policy deliberation among the senior ranks of the government in the Islamic Republic is a process that Western diplomats often refer to as a "black box." Whereas political figures and bastions of power that shape policy in Iran are detectable, it is the informal and non-transparent debate within elite circles that continues to confound Western audiences. From the perspective of the West, such uncertainty about the division of labor and power has most recently been evident during the European Union (EU)-Iran negotiations over Tehran's controversial nuclear program. A frequent complaint by EU negotiators, such as Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy high representative, is the elevated level of ambiguity about the mandate carried by delegations dispatched by Tehran.<sup>4</sup>

For example, 'Ali Larijani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator between August 2005 and October 2007 and the head of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), bewildered his EU counterparts by repeatedly stating that he had no real authority to negotiate on behalf of the government in Tehran.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the same Larijani led the meetings with EU officials even after his resignation and while accompanied by his successor, Saeed Jalili. Jalili, an ideological ally and advisor to President Ahmadinejad, is reported to have then informed EU negotiators in December 2007 to disregard any agreements previously reached with Larijani. *The New York Times* quoted a French official as saying that Jalili had "essentially said that 'everything that Larijani has proposed is a dead letter and we have to start from zero.'" <sup>6</sup> Still, this hardening of policy stance cannot be simply explained by referring to the well-known Larijani-Ahmadinejad personal rivalry. Strategic foreign policy matters are above all the prerogative of the supreme leader and the collective opinion of the SNSC. EU negotiators, as baffled as they must have been by Jalili's statement, could not but assume that the change of tone had been sanctioned by the highest echelons of power in Tehran. After all, the 42-year-old Jalili could not have replaced Larijani as the head of the SNSC and as chief nuclear negotiator without at least tacit approval by Khamene'i.<sup>7</sup>

In the meantime, Larijani has since his departure continued to act as a leading emissary of the Islamic Republic, most recently engaging Egyptian officials in December to re-establish diplomatic ties between Tehran and Cairo. A rival of Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential elections and someone who barely disguises his contempt for the policy style of the president, Larijani also still sits at SNSC as one of the two members representing Khamene'i.

Instances of vague or contradictory Iranian foreign policy declarations can be traced back to the early post-revolution years and is a reflection of the often intense factional infighting within the Islamist establishment. A telling case relates to the fate of Salman Rushdie, the British writer whom the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Kho-

4. Omid Memarian, "Iran prepared for the worst," *Open Democracy*, October 30, 2007.

5. Elaine Sciolino and Peter Kiefer, "Iran limits new nuclear negotiator," *International Herald Tribune*, October 23, 2007.

6. Elaine Sciolino, "Iranian pushes nuclear talks back to square 1," *The New York Times*, December 2, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/02/world/middleeast/02iran.html?pagewanted=print>.

7. Reuters, "FACTBOX: Iran's new atomic negotiator Saeed Jalili," <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL239329720071023>. On February 25, Khamene'i publicly applauded the way President Ahmadinejad and Saeed Jalili are handling the nuclear crisis with the West.



meini issued a *fatwa* against in 1989 for allegedly insulting Prophet Muhammad and encouraging his followers to kill him. While the reformist administration of President Muhammad Khatami promised the EU in 1998 that the sentence would not be carried out, hard-line figures, often without a formal political portfolio, simply reaffirmed or even increased the bounty on Rushdie's life and thereby undermined EU-Iran ties.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, Iranian critics of the West's approach to Tehran maintain that such confusion in relation to Iran's position need not exist, and that the solution is to grant 'Ali Khamene'i the attention and deference to which he deems he is entitled. In an interview with *Newsweek* on November 9, 2007, Sadegh Kharrazi, a relative of Khamene'i and a reformist-affiliated former ambassador to Paris who was replaced when Ahmadinejad came to power in August 2005, put it bluntly: "the government of Iran executes foreign policy decisions made by Iran's supreme leader."

Kharrazi, whose uncle, Kamal Kharrazi, was Iran's foreign minister under President Khatami during 1997-2005, suggested that to "circumvent the supreme leader and talk to other people in the government" is futile as Khamene'i has the final say in all foreign policy matters.<sup>9</sup> The statement by Kharrazi, whose sister is married to one of Khamene'i's sons, expresses a sentiment that presumably reverberates in the inner circles of the supreme leader. In other words, the message is that Khamene'i is not part of the problem but indispensable in resolving Iran's standoff with Western states and particularly the United States.

The most often cited example of a Western snub to Khamene'i relates to the 2000 "olive branch" that the then US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, extended to Iran. In a frequently quoted speech to the Asia Society on March 17, 2000, Albright said that the United States welcomes Iran's democratic progression and that Washington recognizes that Iran's youth "spearheading a movement aimed at a more open society and a more flexible approach to the world" are backed by "respected clerics [who] speak increasingly about the compatibility of reverence and freedom, modernity and Islam." Albright went on to say that democratic developments have been "stubbornly opposed by some corners" and that "control over the judiciary, courts, and the police remains in unelected hands."<sup>10</sup>

In Tehran, Khamene'i and his close advisors could not have avoided interpreting Albright's message to mean that he represented the reactionary past and therefore a spent constituent in Iran's political system, while reformist President Khatami represented the "respected" cleric who embodied the future of Iran. Albright's bold distinction between the enlightened and reactionary official voices in Iran, and thus willful expression of a clear preference for the outcome in the political struggle between reformists and supporters of the *status quo* reaffirmed Khamene'i's suspicions about

seeking to curtail the powers of the supreme leader, Khamene'i moved toward the political right that was least critical of existing constitutional arrangements. Khamene'i's propensity to favor rightist forces was strengthened following the massive electoral victories of Muhammad Khatami, a modernist leftist, in the presidential elections of 1997 and 2001.

8. "Iran Group Reaffirms Rushdie Death Edict," *The New York Times*, February 15, 1999. See also Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), p.6. Buchta describes the February 1997 decision by Ayatollah Hasan Sanei, the head of the powerful Fifteenth of Khordad Foundation [Islamic charity], to increase the reward for the killing of Rushdie from \$2 million to \$2.5 million. This was against all the efforts of the then President 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani who had since 1990 maintained that Tehran would not implement Khomeini's 1989 fatwa against the British writer.

9. Maziar Bahari, "A Wall of Mistrust," *Newsweek*, November, 9 2007.

10. See Madeline Albright's speech to Asia Society, March, 17, 2000, available at <http://www.asiasociety.org/speeches/albright4.html>.



Washington's intentions. In a sermon in January 1998, barely after Khatami had begun his efforts to overhaul Iran's battered image on the international stage and reach out to the West, Khamene'i warned against normalizing relations with Washington, and effectively forced Khatami to abandon the idea of reestablishing diplomatic ties with the US.<sup>11</sup>

Sadegh Kharrazi, a proponent of normalization of US-Iran relations later stated that Albright's characterization of Iran's political system as divided between "elected" and "non-elected" authorities was a false distinction conveyed to the US via "wrong signals" from within Iran that have "created a mess" in relations.<sup>12</sup> Then, as now, those close to Khamene'i, such as Kharrazi, maintain that the West's approach of favoring one set of individuals in Tehran to the detriment of other actors is not sustainable and cannot bring about the kind of consensus-based breakthrough that is required in US-Iran relations.

This is a revealing statement because since coming to power in 1989 Khamene'i has rightly viewed himself and the powers of the Office of the Supreme Leader as an aspect of the Islamist regime that the United States finds most objectionable. Hence, the contention is that any move toward a US-Iran dialogue that fails to accommodate and receive the blessing of Khamene'i has been and remains impractical given the distribution of power in Tehran.

Still, Sadegh Kharrazi's description of the centrality of Khamene'i is inflated, and to blame the West for misreading Tehran's intentions is to ignore the ambiguities that are part and parcel of the Islamist political system. In Iran's multitude of loosely connected centers of authority, Khamene'i is a leading figure but one who cannot and does not simply override all other opinions and interests.

#### *'ALI KHAMENE'I: IRAN'S ANXIOUS LEADER*

The constitution of the Islamic Republic gives the supreme leader sweeping powers. The Office of the Supreme Leader is the ultimate arbiter in political, economic, military and social policies. Article 110 in the constitution effectively sanctions the supreme leader to define and oversee the proper implementation of all major policies pursued by the Islamic Republic.<sup>13</sup> The current occupant of this office, 'Ali Khamene'i, was appointed as Iran's second supreme leader on 5 June 1989, two days after the death of the Islamic Republic's founding father, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Khamene'i was installed in the top job rather hurriedly and as a result of expedient political calculations among senior circles of the regime following the death of Khomeini. Three months prior to his death, a fiery political fallout between Khomeini and Grand Ayatollah Hossein-'Ali Montazeri, who was then the designated successor as supreme leader, led to Montazeri's forced resignation. With no other obvious successor in line that had Montazeri's religious credentials, Khomeini forced

11. See Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* p.135.

12. Gareth Smyth, "Transcript: Interview with Sadegh Kharrazi," *Financial Times*, July 25, 2006, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/1/275cfc0c-1bf3-11db-a555-0000779e2340.html>.

13. See the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, available at <http://www.salamiran.org/IranInfo/State/Constitution>.



through a highly convenient constitutional amendment.

Article 109 of constitution was repealed, and the supreme leader was no longer required to possess the highest Shia religious credentials (grand ayatollah). The Assembly of Experts, comprised of senior Shia clergy that appoint and oversee the performance of the supreme leader, opted for Khamene'i, a mid-ranking cleric (hojjat-ul eslam) and a loyalist touted as a successor by Khomeini prior to his death. The compromise candidate was elevated to an ayatollah by the Assembly of Experts, although this was solely a political act. To this day, Khamene'i's religious scholarship continue to be dismissed by clerical circles in Iran who are critical of, if not opposed to theocratic rule.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Khamene'i from the outset of his tenure has had to wrestle with questions of political and religious legitimacy in this theocratic system, which in turn shapes his leadership style and priorities.

Khomeini, at least from the perspective of those who supported the establishment of an Islamic Republic and rule of the jurispudent (Supreme Leader) had two major attributes that made him an undoubted leader, but neither of which are possessed by Khamene'i. Khomeini was a charismatic revolutionary leader who was instrumental in mobilizing a large part of the population against Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (Shah). He was also a mujtahid (Islamic legal scholar) and marja taghleid (source of emulation), a Shia religious figure qualified to issue religious rulings based on his own reasoning and fundamentals of Islamic jurisprudence. A combination of a forceful personality and religious acumen and seniority based on decades of learning at Shia seminaries in Qom and Najaf made Khomeini a popular political-religious leader, with a significant devout following in Iran.

Khamene'i, on the other hand, is not recognized as a mujtahid. By his own account, he had to cut short his studies in Qom to attend to his ill father in 1964.<sup>15</sup> It is much due to his mere six years of formal Islamic education (1958-1964) that Khamene'i's ascent to the title of an ayatollah and supreme leader has always been disputed by his Shia religious critics. Nonetheless, while most of Iran's Shia clerical elite are believed to reject the current political make-up and the politicization of Islam,<sup>16</sup> only a small portion has been publicly vocal in its criticism of Khamene'i and the concept of the velayat-e faqih (Guardianship of Jurisprudent). Most notably, in November 1997, Grand Ayatollah Hossein-'Ali Montazeri declared Khamene'i unfit to preside as the highest religious authority, a charge that has kept the 86-year old under house-arrest ever since. As a result, Khamene'i is well-aware of the limitations of his support base among the clergy.

Furthermore, while Khamene'i was politically active in the anti-Shah Islamist movement, he was neither a prominent activist in the preceding years to the 1979 Iranian Revolution nor did he perform a central role in the revolution itself. Reservations over his competence as a religious scholar and political track record have undoubtedly made him vulnerable and evermore suspicious, forcing him to safeguard his political position and choose loyalty and expediency over competence when appointing of-

#### Iran's Next Supreme Leader

In July 2007, the 85-year-old Ayatollah 'Ali Akbar Meshkini, the chairman of the Assembly of Experts passed away. Meshkini, a Khamene'i loyalist, had been the unchallenged head of this powerful organ since 1990. The assembly is theoretically empowered to dismiss the supreme leader for poor performance. Its other central role is that it can appoint the next Supreme Leader.

Meshkini's successor was 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was voted to the chairmanship after winning the backing of the majority of the 86 senior Shia clergy who serve in the assembly. Rafsanjani swiftly declared that his chairmanship would perform a more "activist role," which was no doubt a signal to Khamene'i. Although since his appointment Rafsanjani has not sought to use the assembly as a vehicle to publicly confront Ayatollah Khamene'i, there is no doubt that his election to this office by his fellow reformist and traditional conservative clergymen significantly reduces the prospects of Iran's next Supreme Leader emerging from the far right faction of President Ahmadinejad.

14. See Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* pp. 46-57.

15. See official biography on 'Ali Khamenei's personal web site, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/EN/index.php?p=bio>.

16. See Buchta, *Who Rules Iran?* pp86-101.



### Khamene'i and the Military

During his time as the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini repeatedly warned against men in uniform from entering the political process. Ayatollah Khamene'i, however, has turned to the armed forces, and particularly those affiliated with the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), as a source of support against those who criticize the degree of power invested in the office of the supreme leader.

Khamene'i's close personal ties with many former members of the armed forces can be traced back to the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) when he was Khomeini's personal representative dealing with military affairs and oversaw civilian control over the IRGC. Without Khamene'i's tacit backing, former IRGC commanders such as Ahmadinejad, Larijani, Qalibaf, and dozens of others who entered the parliament in the 2004 elections could not have the degree of political clout which they presently hold.

This alliance and the 'militarization' of Iranian politics has many critics within the system. On February 10, 2008, the grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini, Hassan Khomeini, warned against military interference in the political debate. This was a response to a statement of support for the far right faction by Mohammed 'Ali Jaafari, the current head of the IRGC. Hassan Khomeini stated that "one of the most important criteria for following the path laid out by the imam [Khomeini] is the presence, or not, of the military in politics."

officials.

### KHAMENE'I'S POLITICAL PREFERENCES AND CONSTRAINTS

As a result of these realities, while Khamene'i prefers to portray himself as the aloof religious leader, his personal history and rise in the ranks of the Islamist system reveal someone who has above all been a skillful political contender. While acting as the guardian of the regime with pretenses of overseeing a pluralistic Islamic polity, Khamene'i has sought to ensure that the Office of the Supreme Leader remains the central arbiter in the policy-making process. While he has striven to enhance his religious standing among the wider clerical class, such efforts are clearly secondary to day-to-day political considerations.<sup>17</sup>

Whenever a certain political bloc within the system has been in the ascendancy, Khamene'i has moved to counterbalance its influence whether in the realm of domestic or foreign affairs. Domestically, this has been evident in the context of suppressing political dissent such as approving violent crackdowns on pro-democracy students in 1999 and 2003, and sanctioning the suppression of critical media during the presidency of the reformist President Khatami. Disturbed by the popularity of Khatami, and afraid of the consequences of an overhaul of the constitution as was espoused by many reformist parliamentary deputies, Khamene'i backed far right candidates against the reformist candidates in the 2004 parliamentary and 2005 presidential elections.

On the other hand, he has also acted against the far right faction when they have become too vocal and in Khamene'i's view have jeopardized the political status quo. For example, in June 2006, Khamene'i issued a decree establishing the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations (Shora-ye Rahbordi-ye Ravabet-e Khareji), as a response to Ahmadinejad's adventurous behavior in the realm of foreign policy.<sup>18</sup>

Two aspects of Khamene'i's decision to issue the decree are noteworthy in two respects. The first is the ad hoc process and the scope for his personal intervention that led to the establishment of the council and the inherent implication for Iranian officials engaged in foreign policy as this step represented further policy fragmentation. The second was the appointment of individuals associated with the reformist Khatami administration to leadership roles in the council.

One can judge this to be a divide-and-rule strategy, or as an attempt by Khamene'i to achieve maximum policy consensus at a time when Tehran was under unprecedented pressure by the West. Alternatively, one can interpret the decree as being a response to behind-the-scene demands from senior members of the Islamist ruling class that he was simply unable to ignore. In other words, political accommodation was likely necessary to prevent disgruntlement within the regime relating to Ahmadinejad's handling of foreign policy from becoming a full-blown internal regime crisis. Either way, the deliberations that led to the body's creation also circumvented the Iranian parliament, the only body comprised of representatives directly elected

17. Ayatollah Khamene'i is reportedly studying under the supervision of the more learned Ayatollah Shahrudi, the Iraqi-born head of Iran's judiciary who was appointed by Khamene'i in 1999.

18. See Bill Samii, "Iran: New Foreign Policy Council Could Curtail Ahmadinejad's Power," June 29, 2006, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.





by the people. Again, this underlines the intense political management at the top by Khamene'i, though it fails to clarify the precise factors that pushed Khameni in this direction.

In the sphere of foreign affairs, while Khamene'i has sought to disperse policy generation, with the aim of minimizing the likelihood that a single institution or political faction in Iran becomes dominant, the impact of the fragmented policy process has resulted in disorientation.

For example, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the stewardship of Manuchehr Mottaki is clearly sidelined in relation to major policy matters, Khameni's trusted personal advisors such as Larijani and 'Ali Akbar Velayati (the latter was foreign minister during 1981-1997), are often quietly negotiating with foreign governments at the leader's personal discretion. Velayati, for example, has in recent months held low-profile meetings with the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy<sup>19</sup> (no details about the discussions have been released), and traveled to Moscow in February 2007 to convey Khamene'i's hopes that the Kremlin would refrain from supporting the West at the United Nations Security Council on the Iranian nuclear case.

The effects of this kind of obscure shuttle-diplomacy as sanctioned by Khamene'i were most recently evident in Larijani's visit to Cairo in December. Mehr news agency reported on January 2 that Larijani had met President Hosni Mubarak and other senior Egyptian officials with the aim of resuming diplomatic ties between the two states. A week later, Iran's Fars News agency quoted Alireza Attar, Iran's deputy foreign minister, stating that Larijani's trip had been a "private visit." This prompted Larijani to tell journalists that just because the trip had been "unofficial" it "did not mean that it had no political content."<sup>20</sup>

Other leading personalities also at times appear as free agents in the foreign policy debate. These figures include among others 'Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Hassan Rohani (Larijani's predecessor at the SNSC) and Kamal Kharrazi (former foreign minister under Khatami), who periodically receive senior foreign dignitaries in Tehran, although they are not considered as Khamene'i loyalists. Rohani's recent bilateral meetings with EU officials in Europe have angered the far right faction to the extent that Ahmadinejad has repeatedly suggested that such contacts undermine Iranian national objectives and were subservient to Western interests.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, as Rohani remains one of Khamene'i's two representative on the SNSC, the far right faction is constrained in its criticism.<sup>22</sup>

19. Reported by IRNA, January 6, 2008.

20. "Iran ex-nuclear official denies meeting with French president," IRNA, January 11, 2007.

21. During the 29<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Ahmadinejad said that certain individuals from inside Iran had "decided to sit down with the enemies of the country" and had given "Iran's enemies information about the situation inside the country" while also encouraging the "enemy to pursue harsher policies against Tehran." Ahmadinejad then goes on to say that these individuals are not "part of the Iranian nation" and that Iranians will "throw them away." Ahmadinejad warned these "people who have access to money and power" in Iran's political system to cease their activities and support Iran's nuclear stance. This was in no doubt targeted at officials such as Rohani who have repeatedly criticized the president for his policy style and harsh rhetoric which are deemed to be damaging to Iran's interests on the international stage. Part of the speech by Ahmadinejad can be viewed at <http://www.irannegah.com/Video.aspx?id=486>.

22. Khamene'i has appointed two individuals to represent him at the SNSC: 'Ali Larijani and Hassan Rohani.



The question, then, is how much of the foreign policy process does Khamene'i disperse willingly and how much of it is as a result of factional dynamics that he is incapable of resisting? The answer is hard to discern, given the lack of transparency and rampant unaccountability in the Iranian political system. Nevertheless, given that the political scene is fragmented, and parties are created on a whim and alliances are constantly shifting, it is clear that senior personalities are often the main drivers who initiate and dominate policy debates. A recent such example involved the publication of Rafsanjani's memoirs in August 2007, in which he suggested that as early as 1984 Ayatollah Khomeini considered toning down the regime's anti-American rhetoric.

This move by Rafsanjani was a swipe at President Ahmedinejad, who insists that he is true to the teachings of the late imam. But Khamene'i could not afford to sit idly by as Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad brawled, given the importance of the issue of US-Iran relations. The editor of *Kayhan* newspaper, Hussein Shariatmadari, who was appointed by Khamene'i and represents the latter's views, shortly after in an editorial strongly questioned the accurateness of Rafsanjani's account. The editorial effectively ended that round of debate on how to proceed in relations with Washington. It was Khamene'i's way of making sure that individuals such as Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad, and Khatami do not sideline him on vital policy matters.

Shariatmadari is merely one of numerous influential officials who are directly appointed by the supreme leader. In essence, Khamene'i has employed his power to appoint officials to various political and military posts as a way to reorganize the policymaking processes and to create an integrated network of individuals at critical positions within the government whose personal loyalty trumps their factional affiliations.

Given his own reservations about the recognition he enjoys as a political-religious leader among senior Shia clergy in Iran, Khamene'i has therefore moved away from depending on political backing from the traditional clerical leaders supportive of the regime and has instead sought to cultivate a circle of junior to mid-ranking clergymen and former military officials-turned-politicians who have successfully entered the political realm largely due to Khamene'i's sponsorship. In this regard, Khamene'i notably abandoned Khomeini teachings when he opened the gate to politics to men in uniform, something that Khomeini had time after time warned against.

Despite such efforts, Khamene'i's grip on political power is still reliant on his capacity to forge the strongest possible consensus within the Islamist political system. His oversight and interventions, deriving from the powers of his office, are the main reason why simmering tensions among the main political factions has not led to broader and more public fallout among those who remain loyal to the concept of the Islamic Republic. In turn, this has led to more fragmentation and incoherence in the Iranian policy-making process and, consequently, even more uncertainty as to what Tehran's next moves might be.