

## ISSUE BRIEF

# After Sistani and Khamenei: Looming Successions Will Shape the Middle East

JULY 2019 ABBAS KADHIM AND BARBARA SLAVIN

## Introduction

Successions to key figures in Iraq and Iran will shape and shake the Middle East.

In Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani—a source of emulation and religious devotion (*marja' al-taqlid*) for a majority of the world's nearly two hundred million Shia Muslims—turns eighty-nine in August. Next door in Iran, meanwhile, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic for the past three decades, has just marked his eightieth birthday and thirtieth year in that office.

The processes for choosing successors to these two men are very different. But, the order in which those successions occur, as well as the individuals chosen, will have a major impact on religion and politics in the region and beyond. The successions will help determine how independent Iraq will be, whether Iran finally succeeds in exporting its unique system of government, how aggressively Iran develops its nuclear program, and the nature of both countries' relations, or lack thereof, with the United States.

## Why succession matters

While the supreme leader is, by definition, the most powerful figure in Iran, he is not the sole decider. Major decisions require hard bargaining among factions and power centers, and even the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is not a monolith. In general, however, Khamenei has leaned right in both foreign and domestic policy, supporting Iran's opportunistic expansion of influence in the region and repressing democratic aspirations at home. He did show what he called “heroic flex-

The Atlantic Council's Iraq Initiative addresses the current security challenges Iraq faces as well as identifies policies that will unlock Iraq's potential to develop the drivers of any successful society: inclusive politics, economic development, and a vibrant civil society.

The Atlantic Council's Future of Iran Initiative aims to promote US-Iran engagement and seeks to promote a deeper understanding of Iran to inform US policymakers and citizens, as they consider and formulate new approaches to the Islamic Republic.



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif meet with Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf, Iraq, March 13, 2019. *Source: Sistani.org* <http://www.sistani.org/english/archive/26259/>

ibility” in approving the negotiations with the West that led to the 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but has felt vindicated in his distrust of the United States since the election of President Donald Trump and the US withdrawal from the deal.

For more than a year, Iran remained in compliance with the JCPOA. However, it has now begun to breach the limits set in the deal out of frustration at the US-imposed oil embargo and the failure of Europe to find sufficient means of bypassing sanctions. A more hard-line successor could take an even more confrontational policy toward the United States and Iran’s regional adversaries, especially if Iran’s threat perceptions from those quarters escalate. There is even the possibility of a coup if the regime’s survival is at stake, although the IRGC is more likely to opt for a continuation of its current privileged status as the power behind a theo-

cratic front man. On the other hand, a more pragmatic or liberal successor would likely return to compliance with the deal, and might be more willing to try building upon it should the United States change its maximum-pressure approach.<sup>1</sup>

Given the current situation, a Khamenei-like figure is more likely in the immediate future if the leader dies while tensions continue to mount with the United States. As Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, an associate professor of international affairs at Texas A&M University, put it, “Conservatives have not been so confident in decades,” reflecting Iran’s increased regional influence and the unremitting hostility of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, there is an equally important question of succession in Iraq. Although Sistani has no political role in the Iraqi constitution, his de facto authority

1 Collin Brown, Jose Drowne, Christopher Fix, Jonathan Gillespie, Christopher Petersen, and Abdullah Qayomi, “Iran After Khamenei: A Framework for Succession,” Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, April 27, 2017.

2 Interview with Barbara Slavin, March 14, 2019.



Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (right) meets with Sadegh Larijani (left), Ali Larijani, Hassan Rouhani, and Ebrahim Raisi. Source: still image from manoto.news <https://www.manoto.news/news/u1oljx/news33973>

and impact on Iraqi politics are paramount. What has made this authority a force for good, and limited it, is the grand ayatollah's self-restraint. Since 2003, he voluntarily confined his interference to the most consequential circumstances. Additionally, Sistani remained supportive of the Iraqi democratization process and the project of establishing a civil state in Iraq, based on the largely secular 2005 constitution and existing body of laws. A likeminded successor would ensure the continuation of the current trajectory of Iraqi politics and prevent unexpected, and unwelcome, shocks to Iraq's fragile political conditions. Any shift in this influence from an ideologically divergent successor would take the country on a rough political roller coaster.

Sistani's succession also matters a great deal because he has established a wide network of loyalties that will not easily transfer to a successor. One important component of this network is the politically and militarily controversial voluntary force also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which came into being after his historic 2014 *fatwa* (binding religious edict) of defensive *jihad* against the self-designated

Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). In spite of a complicated system of loyalties that extend from domestic affiliations to foreign entanglements, the PMF derives its legitimacy from Sistani, who also serves as the only effective check on its conduct. Sistani's absence will dismantle the framework that binds these essentially independent units and unleash their other respective loyalties, making it extremely difficult for the Iraqi government to keep them under control or direct their future activities for the good of the country—much less restructure them under the 2016 Popular Mobilization Forces Law—a process Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi just started to implement.<sup>3</sup>

The chronology of succession in Iran and Iraq is another important matter. The passing of either leader will leave a vacuum that may lead to a dramatic change in the current authority equilibrium. Given the nature of succession in each case—and the different attitudes of the two leaders—it seems that if Sistani passes first, Iraq will have a greater challenge in the post-Sistani era than Iran will if Khamenei passes first. In the words of one influential cleric in Najaf, "If Sistani dies first, we

3 Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi issued E.O. no. 237 on June 30, 2019, to start the implementation of the PMF Law.

may have to gather our belongings and relocate from Najaf.<sup>4</sup> He was referring to the eventual Iranian micro-management of Najaf's intellectual environment, which is currently curbed by the presence of Sistani. Thanks to Sistani's tolerance and respect for the freedom of thought and debate, Najaf, as a religious center, is witnessing the most tolerant era in its entire history.

### Grand Ayatollah Sistani: Role and likely successors

Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has been the most influential leader in Iraq since the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Although he is an Iranian national, his lengthy residence in Iraq—he has resided in Najaf continuously since 1951—and position as the highest *Marja'* in the Najaf seminary (the *Hawza*) granted him legitimacy in assuming a central role in Iraqi public affairs.<sup>5</sup> His style of limited interference in the political process and his support for a civil, democratic, and non-theocratic state adds more legitimacy to his role. His views on Iraqi affairs are recognized and respected by Iraqis, as well as throughout the international community.<sup>6</sup> He is frequently consulted by United Nations representatives in Iraq, and former UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon visited him in Najaf in 2014. Sistani generally does not receive foreign political leaders, but the United Nations is exempt from this rule. It is fair to say that every major international decision on Iraq's political future in the post-Hussein era has taken into consideration any possible reaction from the grand ayatollah.

In Iraq's domestic affairs, Sistani's role has been paramount. He was the decisive voice on the nature of the constitution-writing process, insisting on an elected committee to write it. Although his opinion on this matter was the right approach, it had an unintended consequence when the elected constitution-writing committee ended up being ill-prepared and lacked

basic understanding of constitutionalism. The group members were more informed by their ethnic and sectarian partisanship than any measure of statesmanship.

In terms of social relations, Sistani deserves great credit for preventing Iraq from descending into a full-scale civil war, through his relentless efforts reining in the Shia from initiating sectarian violence or retaliating against strong provocations, like the demolition of the Samarra shrine.<sup>7</sup> However, Sistani's most memorable role will be his historic *fatwa* calling on all Iraqis to join the armed forces and fight ISIS, which captured Mosul on June 10, 2014, expanded within a few days to control approximately one-third of Iraqi territory, and posed the worst existential threat to Iraq in its modern history. Seeing the Iraqi military collapse and the government paralyzed, with no serious prospects of help from the international community, Sistani issued a rare *fatwa* of defensive *jihad*, the likes of which a Shia ayatollah had not declared in a century.<sup>8</sup> Tens of thousands responded to the *fatwa* and fought against ISIS, while Iraq's armed forces regrouped and regained their combat readiness and an international coalition was built to assist these efforts.

Sistani's extraordinary status means that for the first time in Iraqi history, the succession of the highest *marja'* is an extremely consequential matter. In the past, it was a question of spiritual and jurisprudential leadership, with little political importance; the passing of a *marja'* had never affected the course of political life. In many cases, pious clerics refrained from assuming this responsibility, and many eligible ones had their ambitions curbed by fear of what they would suffer under harsh dictators like Saddam Hussein. Sistani's successor, on the other hand, will inherit a position of unlimited potential influence and the ability to shape Iraq's future for many decades to come. The number of clerics, both qualified and unqualified, who are preparing to enter the arena is unprecedented.

4 Off-record interview by Abbas Kadhim with a leading cleric in Najaf, May 2, 2019.

5 For Shia Muslims, a *marja'* is a source of religious guidance to imitate or follow. For a brief biography of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, see Abbas Kadhim, "Sistani: Ali Hussein," in Michael R. Fischbach, ed., *Biographical Encyclopedia of The Modern Middle East & North Africa Vol. II* (Farmington Hills: Gale, 2008), 772-776.

6 For a detailed discussion of Sistani's leadership style, see Abbas Kadhim, "Forging a Third Way: Sistani's Marja'iyyah between Quietism and Wilayat al-Faqih," in Ali Paya and John L. Esposito, eds., *Iraq, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 66-79.

7 Robert F. Worth, "Blast Destroys Shrine in Iraq, Setting Off Sectarian Fury," *New York Times*, February 22, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/22/international/middleeast/blast-destroys-shrine-in-iraq-setting-off-sectarian.html>.

8 See Abbas Kadhim and Luay Al Khatteeb, "What Do You Know About Sistani's Fatwa?" *Huffington Post*, September 9, 2014, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-do-you-know-about-si\\_b\\_5576244](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-do-you-know-about-si_b_5576244).

## What is the succession process in Najaf?

Unlike the succession to Iran's supreme leader, which is fully canonized by the Iranian constitution (Articles 107–111), there is no specific procedure for succession in the Najaf *marja'iyah*, no role for the state to play in selecting a successor, nor even a loophole to tip the balance in favor of one contender over the others. There are two criteria for selecting a *marja'*: piety and superiority of knowledge in jurisprudence. It is the burden of every lay person—anyone who is not an accomplished scholar—to inquire about identifying the highest-ranking living scholar according to these two criteria, and to follow his *fatwa* on each matter that relates to religion and life. These edicts are found in the books a scholar publishes, or directly obtained from him, his office, or his authorized representatives. When the scholar dies, his emulators can switch to the next highest-ranking scholar or, if he authorizes them, they can continue to emulate him on the issues he addressed and refer to the highest living scholar on new questions. The identification of the most qualified scholars for the *marja'iyah* is generally a task for the mid-level scholars (ayatollahs) who teach in the seminary, enjoy access to high-ranking grand ayatollahs, and possess the requisite knowledge and expertise to discern how to rank the leading scholars.

There have been only a few occasions when there was only one undisputed *marja'*. Most of the time, there are a few highly esteemed scholars emulated by ordinary Shia. However, there was always one *marja'* who was referred to as the highest-ranking *marja'* (*al-Marja' al-A'la*). While this is not an official position, its holder commands great influence among the Shia; Ali Sistani currently holds this rank. The succession of the highest *marja'* is an amorphous process, in which the community considers a few names to identify the highest-ranking scholar. In certain cases, the succession is determined in a relatively short time (weeks or months), while in others it has taken several years. As stated above, the political stakes were very low in the past, so who was the next highest-ranking *marja'* did not matter much politically.

Given the influential role of Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Iraqi politics today, his departure from the scene will leave Iraq at a crossroads. On the one hand, not

identifying his successor quickly will leave Iraq with an enormous political vacuum and allow some serious vulnerabilities—Iraqis commonly call Sistani “Iraq’s safety valve.” On the other hand, identifying a successor will put the country in his hands to mold its political future in any way he likes. The new *marja'* can choose to continue Sistani's path of self-restraint and reserve for himself the role of an impartial supporter of the state, with limited interference only in cases of utmost necessity—or he could opt for gradual intervention toward some measure of *wilayat al-faqih*, the Iranian system (also called *velayat-e faqih*), in which a senior cleric has the last word on all major government decisions.

The following are among those considered possible successors to Sistani, or strong candidates for the *marja'iyah* in the near future.



**Shaykh Ishaq al-Fayyadh:** Born in Afghanistan in 1930, he is, along with Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the most knowledgeable of the living students of Grand Ayatollah Abulqasim al-Khoei. He epitomizes the image of a solid scholar in the Najafi *Hawza*, whose entire life and preoccupation revolves around the perfection of his professional credentials. Therefore, he is perhaps the person most eligible to succeed Sistani as the leading ayatollah, if he outlives Sistani. However, being an Afghan might make his ascendance to the top-ranking position somewhat difficult, and unprecedented. Like Sistani, Fayyadh stands against the clergy's involvement in politics, considering those who assume official political positions as being unworthy of people's respect.<sup>9</sup>



**Sayyid Muhammad Said al-Hakim:** Born in Najaf in 1934, he is a grandson of the leading *Marja'* Sayyid Mohsin al-Hakim (who died in 1970). He studied with his grandfather and with Grand Ayatollah Abulqasim al-Khoei. He is considered one of the highest-ranking scholars in Najaf and, being an Iraqi, he is the frontrun-

9 Conversation with Abbas Kadhim, December 2010.

ner to succeed Sistani as the leading *Marja'*. However, his poor health may preclude him from taking on this onerous task in the coming years. This is an important consideration, because it will be difficult to deal with two successions in a short time, as happened in 1992 when al-Khoei died. His successor, Grand Ayatollah Abdula'la al-Sabzavari, died within a year, causing a new quandary. Unlike 1992, the current sociopolitical environment in Iraq is less tolerant of instability in the *Marja'iyah* leadership. If the ideal continuity under Sistani is interrupted, the second-best scenario would be having a minimal number of interruptions and successions.



**Shaykh Muhammad Baqir Irawani:** Born in Najaf in 1949, he is one of Najaf's most prominent teachers. He studied with the most important scholars in Najaf: al-Khoei, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, and Sistani. He left Najaf during the hard years of Saddam Hussein's rule and lived in Qom in Iran,

where he studied with Grand Ayatollah Jawad Tabrizi and taught at the seminary for many years. His exile ended after the collapse of Hussein's regime. For many years, he has been one of the pillars of Shia seminary education. His audio lectures provided rich materials to students and researchers who could not travel to Qom or Najaf to attend his teaching circle, which is currently one of the most popular among advanced students.



**Shaykh Hadi Al Radhi:** Also born in Najaf, he studied with Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq and Tabrizi in Iran. He gave lectures on *wilayat al-faqih* in Najaf after his return from Iran. According to one of his students, Al Radhi's view on *wilayat al-faqih* is identical with Sistani's position.<sup>10</sup> According to Sistani, the

*faqih* has a general authority in essential matters, but its scope does not include the sweeping powers the Iranian constitution gives to the position's holder.



**Shaykh Muhammad al-Sanad:** He was born in Manama, Bahrain in 1961. After receiving a degree in engineering from London, he moved to Iran in 1980 to attend traditional religious education in the seminary of Qom. He studied with leading scholars in Qom, such as Ayatollahs Mohammad Rouhani, Jawad Tabrizi, Wahid Khorasani, and Mirza Hashim Amoli, among others. He was arrested by Bahraini authorities in 2005 for calling on the United Nations to force the Bahraini government out and hold a referendum on the kind of government that Bahrainis want. His Bahraini citizenship was later revoked. In 2010, he relocated to Najaf and became one of the pillars of its seminary.

Although Shaykhs Irawani, Al Radhi, and al-Sanad—among others in their generation—are qualified to assume the role of a leading *Marja'*, they face several obstacles. One is the requirement of absolute superiority in scholarship and knowledge (*a'lamiyah*). As this condition is impossible to ascertain, age becomes a paramount advantage. Certain eligible scholars, such as Sistani's sons, are precluded because of the standing tradition against treating the *Marja'iyah* position as inheritance. Another obstacle facing this tier of scholars is their role as the experts who identify to lay people the most eligible scholar to emulate. If they throw their hats in the ring, their opinions will be tainted by an apparent conflict of interest.

## Succession in Iran

In 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the towering leader of the Islamic Revolution, died without an obvious successor. Khomeini had initially designated a senior cleric, Hossein Ali Montazeri, but dropped him after Montazeri harshly criticized the regime for executing several thousand political prisoners at the end of the Iran-Iraq war. The country's clerical elite, led by then-Speaker of Parliament Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, chose then-President Ali Khamenei, a mid-level cleric, and amended the constitution to allow him to succeed Khomeini. The new constitution also eliminated the post of prime minister and gave executive authority

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Abbas Kadhim. Per a long-standing tradition, *Hawza* students prefer to remain anonymous when speaking about their mentors, even when their views are not controversial or sensitive.

to the president. Rafsanjani then ran for and won the presidency. But, while he was initially more influential than Khamenei, the leader soon eclipsed the president, forging a strong alliance with the IRGC and other repressive security institutions. These institutions, which were weak at the end of the Iran-Iraq war, have since grown enormously in wealth and power, and are likely to play the kingmaker role in selecting Khamenei's successor that Rafsanjani performed in 1989.

Despite his position at the top of a theocracy, Khamenei is not widely viewed as a spiritual figure by the Shia in Iran or beyond. Instead, his position is more like that of general secretary of the old Soviet Communist Party—the chief apparatchik backed by the deep state. Thus, his successor does not need to be a senior cleric; more likely, he will be someone with extensive government experience, as well as close ties to the IRGC.

Assuming the constitution is not changed again, Khamenei's successor will inherit enormous power. Under the current constitution, the leader commands the armed forces and appoints the heads of each military branch, Friday prayer leaders who promote the party line throughout the country, and representatives to every major government institution. The leader names half the members of the Guardian Council, a body that vets all candidates for elected office. The leader also names the head of the judiciary, who recommends the Guardian Council's other six members, and the leader appoints the head of state radio and television. He also has access to vast financial resources confiscated from the Iranian monarchy and upper classes in 1979.<sup>11</sup>

The leader is not a complete dictator, however. When making important decisions, particularly on foreign policy, Khamenei has sought a consensus within the country's Supreme Council of National Security, which includes the president, the speaker of the parliament, and the ministers of intelligence, foreign affairs, and defense. He may also consult with the Expediency Discernment Council, charged with resolving conflicts

among government branches, and he will keep public sentiments in mind. Still, the leader has the last word.

At times, the Iranian political elite have debated whether to amend the constitution again to reduce the powers of the leader, replace him with a council, or even eliminate the position altogether. Rafsanjani got into hot water in 2005 when one of his sons said in an interview that if Rafsanjani won reelection for a third term as president that year, he would make the leader's position ceremonial "like the king of England."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps not coincidentally, Rafsanjani lost to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who Khamenei considered less threatening. Rafsanjani died in 2017, and there is no other single figure of equivalent weight on the Iranian political scene.

Experts on Iran's complex politics caution that identifying a likely successor to Khamenei is a speculative exercise that is certain to be affected by Khamenei's longevity, as well as domestic and regional conditions at the time of his death. Ideally, a successor would have both strong religious and political credentials. For a time, it was thought that the regime was grooming Iraq-born Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, a former head of the judiciary, as a potential successor to either Khamenei or Sistani, but Shahroudi died in 2018. While in Najaf the size of religious following will be much more determinative, the exigencies of ruling Iran are such that political experience and a network of influence are almost certain to trump religious credentials in the choice of the next supreme leader.

The following are among those considered in the running to be Khamenei's successor, as of this writing.



**Ebrahim Raisi**

At fifty-eight, Raisi is young enough to have a long tenure if Khamenei dies in the near future. A *seyyid*, or descendant of the prophet—like both Khamenei and Khomeini—Raisi is a veteran bu-

11 Steve Stecklow, Babak Dehghanpisheh, and Yeganeh Torbati, "Khamenei Controls Massive Financial Empire Built on Property Seizures," Reuters, November 11, 2013 <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part1>.

12 Barbara Slavin, "Iran Looks, Again, to 'Experienced Captain,'" *USA Today*, February 7, 2005, <https://en.kadivar.com/2005/02/06/iran-looks-again-to-experienced-captain/>.

reaucrat who has spent the past thirty-nine years in the Islamic Republic's judicial branch.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, Khamenei appointed Raisi to head the judiciary. Raisi was also selected as the secretary of the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body that is nominally charged with choosing the next supreme leader. In addition, he is the son-in-law of Ahmad Alamolhoda, a powerful right-wing ayatollah who is Friday prayer leader of the shrine city of Mashhad and the leader's representative in Khorasan Razavi province. However, Raisi is not known for charisma, and lost out to Hassan Rouhani as president in the 2017 elections. He is also controversial for having been one of four members of a so-called "death committee" that ordered the summary execution of an estimated five thousand political prisoners at the end of the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>14</sup>



### Hassan Rouhani

Since the Trump administration quit the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, conventional wisdom has been that Rouhani is out of the running for supreme leader. Clearly, the reimposition of US secondary sanctions has been a devastating blow to hopes that

the JCPOA would ease Iran's reentry into the global economy and provide urgently needed foreign investment and trade. However, experts do not entirely rule out a Rouhani selection. Like Rafsanjani, Rouhani is a resilient pillar of the Islamic Republic who has held a succession of important jobs. At seventy, he is currently serving his second term as president and was Khamenei's representative on the Supreme Council of National Security from 1989-2005. Despite campaigning on promises to open up space for Iranian civil society, he is no liberal. Rouhani's fortunes may have gotten a boost recently when he became the first president of the Islamic Republic to be received in Najaf by Grand Ayatollah Sistani.<sup>15</sup>



### Sadeqh Larijani

Larijani, whom Raisi succeeded as head of the judiciary, is a member of one of Iran's most influential families. Offspring of a famous ayatollah, Hashem Amoli, the Larijanis include Ali Larijani, a former national security adviser and now parliament speaker, a prominent physicist, and a cleric who is a member of the Guardian Council. Sadeqh Larijani, fifty-eight, is also a member of the Assembly of Experts, and came in second to Raisi in recent elections for the secretary of that body. However, the family is widely resented in Iran, and believed to have profited from corruption. Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, angered that many of his top aides have been jailed since he left office, has frequently criticized the Larijanis and threatened to expose evidence of corrupt practices by family members.<sup>16</sup> Larijani's chances may also be undercut by the fact that he was born in Iraq, not Iran.



### Hassan Khomeini

One of fifteen grandchildren of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Hassan Khomeini is handsome, only forty-seven years old, and an unabashed liberal in the context of current Iranian politics. His challenges to the system, such as criticism of the elite for "spreading hatred, grudge, hypocrisy, double standards and dishonesty," would seem to make him a long shot to replace Khamenei.<sup>17</sup> In 2016, the Guardian Council barred him from running for election to the Assembly of Experts. But, if Iran is in crisis at the time of Khamenei's death, and needs an attractive face and famous lineage to calm the public and restore

13 Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Ebrahim Raisi: Iran's New Chief Justice and Possible Supreme Leader in Waiting," *IranSource*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/ebrahim-raisi-iran-s-new-chief-justice-and-possible-supreme-leader-in-waiting>.

14 Ibid.

15 Ali Mamouri, "Sistani to Rouhani: Iraq's Sovereignty Must be Respected," *Al-Monitor*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/iraq-iran-rouhani-sistani-us.html>.

16 "Ahmadinejad Fails To Produce Evidence, Calls For Top Judge's Resignation," Radio Farda, December 20, 2017, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-ahmadinejad-larijani-dispute/28929011.html>.

17 "Khomeini's Grandson Criticizes the Islamic Republic His Grandfather Founded," Radio Farda, December 30, 2018, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-khomeini-grandson-criticizes-islamic-republic/29683893.html>.

some sense of legitimacy, Hassan Khomeini might have a chance.



### Mojtaba Khamenei

A son of the current supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, forty-nine, has amassed enormous power as his father's underling. He is rumored to have played a major role in orchestrating the fraudulent reelection of Ahmadinejad in 2009, and in

suppressing the mass protests that followed.<sup>18</sup> Such a choice would be extremely controversial in Iran, given that the regime prides itself on overturning thousands of years of monarchical rule. But, Mojtaba has the necessary connections with the IRGC and the paramilitary Basij, as well as insight into his father's vast financial resources.



### Mohammad Reyshahri

Mohammad Reyshahri, seventy-two, is a dark-horse candidate. A former minister of intelligence in the 1980s who is associated with the revolution's bloody early days, Reyshahri was out of the public eye for more than a decade after a failed bid for the presidency in 1997. He made a comeback in 2016, running on a so-called "list of hope," and endorsed by Rouhani and reformist former President Mohammad Khatami for the Assembly of Experts. A *mojtahed* considered qualified to interpret Islamic law, Reyshahri is in charge of the Shah Abul Azim shrine in south Tehran. Like Rouhani and Larijani, he is not a *seyyed*. Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar suggests that Reyshahri could be a compromise choice.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, based in Najaf, and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, leader of the Islamic Republic, are today the successors of Grand Ayatollah Abulqasim al-Khoei of Najaf and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic. Despite instances of concession and cooperation, they offer unique political philosophies.

Sistani's passing is likely to create a vacuum, as there is no formal process nor means to replace him, while the Iranian system may quickly appoint a new leader by a vote of the Assembly of Experts.

If Sistani dies before Khamenei, the uncertainties about Iraq's future political stability and independence will grow. Khamenei, with more than thirty years of experience in governing Iran and dealing with religious and political affairs in the wider region, is likely to influence the choice of Sistani's successor and to support a candidate sympathetic to Iranian views. Iranian-backed Iraqi PMF would also benefit from any spiritual vacuum in Najaf, at the expense of those who are strict adherents to Sistani, as it will take time for a new *marja'* to establish himself.

If, on the other hand, Khamenei dies before Sistani, a successor will not immediately inherit his preeminent power, and will also need to navigate Iran's complicated domestic politics. Such a successor may not be as capable of wielding influence abroad until he consolidates his power at home. Thus, from an Iraqi sociopolitical point of view, the longer Sistani lives, the better.

Nevertheless, who takes the seats in Najaf and Tehran, in which order, and how the successions take shape, remain uncertain. What is certain is that the manifold ramifications will reverberate throughout and beyond the Middle East.

18 Julian Borger, "Khamenei's Son Takes Control of Iran's Anti-Protest Militia," *Guardian*, July 8, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/08/khamenei-son-controls-iran-militia>.

19 Interview with Barbara Slavin, March 14, 2019.

## About the Authors



Dr. Abbas Kadhim leads the Atlantic Council Iraq Initiative. He is an Iraq expert and author of *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State*.



Ms. Barbara Slavin directs the Future of Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council. She is the author of *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the US and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* and has visited Iran nine times.

---

## Image Credits

Page 6: Shaykh Muhammad Baqir Irawani – Source: <http://m-mahdi.net/sada-almahdi/persons-3>

Page 6: Shaykh Hadi Al Radhi – Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5h8i3MHZImY>

Page 6: Shaykh Muhammad al-Sanad – Source: <http://m-sanad.com/ar/archives/book/1326>

All images not credited are Wikimedia Commons.

This Issue Brief was made possible by support from Crescent Petroleum, the Ploughshares Fund, and general support to the Council's Middle East programs.



# Atlantic Council

## Board of Directors

### CHAIRMAN

\*John F.W. Rogers

### EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN EMERITUS

\*James L. Jones

### CHAIRMAN EMERITUS

Brent Scowcroft

### PRESIDENT AND CEO

\*Frederick Kempe

### EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRS

\*Adrienne Arsht

\*Stephen J. Hadley

### VICE CHAIRS

\*Robert J. Abernethy

\*Richard W. Edelman

\*C. Boyden Gray

\*Alexander V. Mirtchev

\*Virginia A. Mulberger

\*W. DeVier Pierson

\*John J. Studzinski

### TREASURER

\*George Lund

### SECRETARY

\*Walter B. Slocombe

### DIRECTORS

Stéphane Abrial

Odeh Aburdene

Todd Achilles

\*Peter Ackerman

Timothy D. Adams

Bertrand-Marc Allen

\*Michael Andersson

David D. Aufhauser

Colleen Bell

Matthew C. Bernstein

\*Rafic A. Bizri

Dennis C. Blair

Thomas L. Blair

Philip M. Breedlove

Reuben E. Brigety II

Myron Brilliant

\*Esther Brimmer

R. Nicholas Burns

\*Richard R. Burt

Michael Calvey

James E. Cartwright

John E. Chapoton

Ahmed Charai

Melanie Chen

Michael Chertoff

\*George Chopivsky

Wesley K. Clark

\*Helima Croft

Ralph D. Crosby, Jr.

Nelson W. Cunningham

Ivo H. Daalder

\*Ankit N. Desai

\*Paula J. Dobriansky

Thomas J. Egan, Jr.

\*Stuart E. Eizenstat

Thomas R. Eldridge

\*Alan H. Fleischmann

Jendayi E. Frazer

Ronald M. Freeman

Courtney Geduldig

Robert S. Gelbard

Gianni Di Giovanni

Thomas H. Glocer

Murathan Günal

John B. Goodman

\*Sherri W. Goodman

\*Amir A. Handjani

Katie Harbath

John D. Harris, II

Frank Haun

Michael V. Hayden

Brian C. McK. Henderson

Annette Heuser

Amos Hochstein

\*Karl V. Hopkins

Robert D. Hormats

Andrew Hove

\*Mary L. Howell

Ian Ichnatowycz

Wolfgang F. Ischinger

Deborah Lee James

Reuben Jeffery, III

Joia M. Johnson

Stephen R. Kappes

\*Maria Pica Karp

Andre Kelleners

Sean Kevelighan

Henry A. Kissinger

\*C. Jeffrey Knittel

Franklin D. Kramer

Laura Lane

Richard L. Lawson

Jan M. Lodal

Douglas Lute

Jane Holl Lute

William J. Lynn

Wendy W. Makins

Mian M. Mansha

Chris Marlin

Gerardo Mato

Timothy McBride

John M. McHugh

H.R. McMaster

Eric D.K. Melby

Franklin C. Miller

\*Judith A. Miller

Susan Molinari

Michael J. Morell

Richard Morningstar

Mary Claire Murphy

Edward J. Newberry

Thomas R. Nides

Franco Nuschese

Joseph S. Nye

Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg

Ahmet M. Oren

Sally A. Painter

\*Ana I. Palacio

Kostas Pantazopoulos

Carlos Pascual

Alan Pellegrini

David H. Petraeus

Thomas R. Pickering

Daniel B. Poneman

Dina H. Powell

Robert Rangel

Thomas J. Ridge

Michael J. Rogers

Charles O. Rossotti

Harry Sachinis

Rajiv Shah

Stephen Shapiro

Wendy Sherman

Kris Singh

Christopher Smith

James G. Stavridis

Richard J.A. Steele

Paula Stern

Robert J. Stevens

Mary Streett

Nathan D. Tibbits

Frances M. Townsend

Clyde C. Tuggle

Melanne Vermeer

Charles F. Wald

Michael F. Walsh

Ronald Weiser

Geir Westgaard

Maciej Witucki

Neal S. Wolin

Jenny Wood

Guang Yang

Mary C. Yates

Dov S. Zakheim

### HONORARY DIRECTORS

James A. Baker, III

Ashton B. Carter

Robert M. Gates

Michael G. Mullen

Leon E. Panetta

William J. Perry

Colin L. Powell

Condoleezza Rice

George P. Shultz

Horst Teltschik

John W. Warner

William H. Webster

*\*Executive Committee Members*

*List as of June 28, 2019*



The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

© 2019 The Atlantic Council of the United States. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Atlantic Council, except in the case of brief quotations in news articles, critical articles, or reviews. Please direct inquiries to:

Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,  
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, [www.AtlanticCouncil.org](http://www.AtlanticCouncil.org)