

Khomeinism

April 2020



UNITED
AGAINST
NUCLEAR
IRAN

Table of Contents

Ideology.....3
Governing.....4
Khomeinism Abroad.....5
Conclusion.....6

Khomeinism

Khomeinism is an ideology and a system of governance derived from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Khomeini was such a [singular](#) figure that the U.S. government [assessed](#) the revolution would not have taken place without him. This piece will discuss Khomeinism's ideology, governance structure, and influence abroad.

Ideology

The Islamic Republic's founding father was a rebel within the Shiite clerical establishment. Khomeini departed from the quietists among Iran's clerical establishment who argued against clerical involvement in daily governance. He advocated for a more active role for clerics in the ship of state, once [dubbing](#) the quietists "court mullahs."

To demonstrate Khomeini's extreme views on the proper Islamic governing model, the Central Intelligence Agency once [cited](#) a Western scholar in one of its assessments, arguing that "if Khomeini lives long enough to preside over its institutionalization, Shiism as it has been known in Iran will come to an end." The U.S. intelligence community also [found](#) that "Khomeinism only began to challenge the quietist tradition in the 1960s and...overshadowed it only since 1979."

Khomeinism is thus a radical Shi'a Islamist ideology that fuses religion and governance, utilizing the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) to endow a learned Islamic jurist with the role of supreme leader who holds final religious and political authority over all affairs of state. Under Iran's revolutionary system, velayat-e faqih is invoked to demand loyalty to and justify the authoritarian role of the supreme leader based on divine right. This was an uncompromising stance. There is [evidence](#) to suggest Khomeini's revolutionaries murdered the competition in the lead-up to the Islamic Revolution, specifically Imam Musa al-Sadr, who advocated for a more traditional clerical role.

The other defining principles of Iran's Khomeinist ideology were enmity toward the West, particularly the United States, which is still frequently referred to as [the Great Satan, as well as revolutionary export. There was evidence of secret contacts between Khomeini and the U.S. government before the revolution, but they portray Khomeini as maneuvering his way into power and belie his fundamentally anti-American public worldview later on. He once referred to the United States as the "world-devouring America."](#) Iran has also framed its Islamic Revolution as a supranational liberation movement of oppressed Muslims from "arrogant" colonialist powers who seek to subjugate Islam. [Article 152](#) of Iran's constitution speaks of the country's foreign policy being based on "the defense of the rights of all Muslims." [Article 154](#) explicitly states that the Islamic Republic "supports the just struggles of the mustad'afun [oppressed] against the mustakbirun [tyrants] in every corner of the globe." Thus the Islamic Republic as a global movement is built into its DNA.

Khomeini himself openly called for such a philosophy. In 1980, he [declared](#) "We should try hard to

UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

export our revolution to the world...If we remain in an enclosed environment we shall definitely face defeat.” A declassified U.S. intelligence assessment written in March 1980 [noted](#) “[m]ost Iranian leaders...have been careful to say in public that Tehran has no intention of interfering in the internal affairs of its neighbors and that since a revolution is primarily a spiritual awakening, it must begin in the hearts and minds of the oppressed...Nonetheless, the Iranians believe that they can teach other Islamic peoples the necessary revolutionary techniques and organizational theory.” It is this modus operandi of plausible deniability which has governed the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) throughout the region—providing manpower, money, and materiel to sympathetic proxies and partners.

Governing

In addition to this ideological underpinning, Ayatollah Khomeini left an indelible imprint on the role of the supreme leader in the Islamic Republic. [According](#) to a U.S. intelligence assessment from 1983, Khomeini balanced competing factions and personalities of the Islamic Republic, “permitting neither to achieve a decisive advantage over the other.” During Khomeini’s tenure, the feuding often involved then-President Ali Khamenei and Speaker of Parliament Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

When Khamenei ascended to the supreme leadership, he also adopted this arbitral role. In his public remarks, he usually hedges, providing political space for both pragmatic and hardline elements of the regime to survive and thrive, with Khamenei retaining ultimate control. While Khamenei routinely rails for resolute resistance, he also leaves the door open for those who advocate for negotiation to solve Iran’s mounting problems.

Power in the Islamic Republic is also directly related to the degree of closeness to the supreme leader under Khomeini and Khamenei—indeed both have relied on their sons as confidantes, with Ahmad Khomeini [being](#) chief of staff for his father and Mojtaba Khamenei being an influential [interlocutor](#) for his father.

But there were also significant differences between the two men. Operationally, Khomeini relied on his son Ahmad as his chief of staff. Khamenei, in contrast, has created a sprawling parallel government, named the Office of the Supreme Leader.

Khomeini also delegated to a greater extent than Khamenei. In 1981, Khomeini authorized Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, with whom he later clashed and stripped of power, with taking “any measures that you deem appropriate” in appointments of members of the Supreme Judicial Council. In addition to these judicial matters, there is evidence he [delegated](#) religious questions to Montazeri. Montazeri’s designation as a deputy supreme leader is also evidence of Khomeini’s confidence at apportioning authority. In an interview, with the Office of the Supreme Leader’s Website, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah [revealed](#) that Khomeini designated then-President Khamenei as his “representative” with whom the Party of God’s senior leadership could confer. A declassified U.S. intelligence assessment from 1985 [speculated](#) that Khomeini “probably

delegated...responsibility for many routine matters and even some relatively important issues to other subordinates.” Likewise, in 1988, he [named](#) Rafsanjani as acting commander-in-chief—a title Khomeini held previously.

Khamenei has proven more resistant at such delegation—especially towards figures from Iran’s elected power centers like the presidency or parliament. In fact, in the same interview, Nasrallah mentioned that after Khamenei ascended to the supreme leadership, Khamenei [insisted](#) they remain in “direct contact” and did not appoint a representative as Khomeini did. While there is evidence that he has [delegated](#) part of his leadership responsibilities to Mojtaba Khamenei, with the U.S. government [citing](#) his close work on his father’s behalf with the commander of the IRGC’s Quds Force and the Basij Resistance Force, Khamenei hasn’t afforded figures like Rouhani such privileges. Neither has a figure been publicly anointed as a deputy supreme leader, as Khomeini did during his reign.

In fact, Khamenei has rebuffed attempts to bolster the power of the presidency amid U.S. sanctions on Iran. In 2019, Rouhani [sought](#) more expansive wartime executive powers—like those which existed during the Iran-Iraq War when Khomeini was supreme leader and later dubbed Rafsanjani as an acting commander-in-chief. But Khamenei [refused](#) Rouhani’s attempted power grab.

Khomeinism Abroad

Iran’s theocracy incubated proxies and partners abroad which use Khomeinism as a revolutionary model for indoctrination and subversion. Hezbollah’s foundational document, the 1985 Open Letter, declared [allegiance](#) to “one leader, wise and just”—namely the velayat-e faqih. Hezbollah forces have been on video pledging [loyalty](#) to Khomeini and Khamenei rather than their own country, Lebanon. Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces have also expressed their loyalty to Khamenei, with their former deputy commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, [proclaiming](#) Khamenei “is not a leader for the Iranians only. He belongs to all Muslims.” The Houthis in Yemen have also [expressed](#) their devotion, with their spokesman telling Khamenei in 2019, “We consider your leadership to be the continuation of that of the prophet of Islam.”

Yet, despite Khomeinism’s primacy within Iran and throughout pockets of the region, it is still a controversial concept. [Quietists](#) in the region have pushed back at Khomeinist influence. For example Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq has been locked in a years-long rivalry with Iran’s supreme leader. While Sistani has met with President Rouhani and the Foreign Policy Advisor to Iran’s Supreme Leader [Ali Akbar Velayati](#), he reportedly [refused](#) to meet with Rouhani’s predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Iran’s former Chief Justice [Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi](#). Shahroudi, who died in 2018, became a source of [controversy](#) after Iraqis perceived his representatives as trying to lay the groundwork for Shahroudi, who was Iraqi-born but served as a leading Iranian official, to succeed Sistani.

Conclusion

Khomeinism remains a radical foundational principle for the Islamic Republic—one based on velayat-e faqih, anti-Americanism, and revolutionary export. But since the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has left his own mark on the brand—one of centralization of control around himself and not the Khomeini heirs. Indeed, in the aftermath of Khomeini's death, his own family has been sidelined from the ruling class. In the years before his own demise, Ahmad Khomeini was passed over as a successor for the supreme leader and later found himself relegated to the [role](#) as one of Khamenei's representatives on the Supreme National Security Council. There are also unresolved questions surrounding his death, including [allegations](#) that he was murdered. Ahmad's son, Hassan Khomeini, also found himself marginalized among the Islamic Republic's top brass, after being [disqualified](#) from running for a seat on the Assembly of Experts in 2016. In the end, Khomeinism defined the Islamic Republic's worldview. Khameneism cemented its authoritarianism.