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Unmasking the Bayt: Inside the Supreme Leader's Office, the Hidden Nerve Center of the Islamic Republic

Saeid Golkar
Kasra Aarabi



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ABOUT UANI

United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) is a nonprofit and non-partisan policy organization formed to combat the threats posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

OUR MISSION

UANI educates the public, policymakers, and businesses about the danger posed by the Iranian regime and designs programs to ensure the regime's economic and diplomatic isolation until it abandons its pursuit of nuclear weapons, support for terrorism, regional destabilization, and human rights violations.

AUTHOR BIOS

Saeid Golkar is a senior advisor at United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI) and serves as the UC Foundation Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Tehran University, obtained in 2008, and moved to the United States in 2010. Golkar has held research and teaching positions at prestigious institutions such as Stanford University and Northwestern University. His expertise lies in international and comparative politics with a focus on authoritarian regimes, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. He is also recognized as an expert on the Basij militia and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). His book, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Post-revolutionary Iran* (Columbia University Press, 2015), received the Silver Medal Prize from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He has extensive media experience in broadcast, print and online including BBC, CNN, Reuters, and the Wall Street Journal. Follow him @SaeidGolkar.

Kasra Aarabi is the Director of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Research at United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI). He is a specialist on Iran's military security, and intelligence apparatus, as well as Shi'a extremism. Previously, he served as the Iran Program Lead at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and as an advisor on Iran to the Executive Chairman, former British Prime Minister Sir Tony Blair. He was also a Non-Resident Scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C. Kasra is regularly sought after for counsel by governments, policymakers, military officials, and non-governmental organizations. He has testified on Iran before multiple parliaments and is a frequent contributor to international media. Kasra is a native Persian (Farsi) speaker and holds an MA (with Distinction) in International Relations and a BA (First Class) in International Politics, both from King's College London. He is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of St Andrews, where his research focuses on the IRGC. Follow him @KasraAarabi.

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Executive Summary

“Where is the Supreme Leader?” This question has been repeatedly raised in the context of escalating tensions and the prospect of a direct military confrontation between Iran and the United States. In recent months, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the 86-year-old head of state, has appeared in public far less frequently, and reports suggesting that he may be operating from secure underground locations have intensified speculation. Some observers in the West interpret this reduced visibility as evidence of fear, vulnerability, or even a potential leadership vacuum, especially given his traditionally hands-on authoritarian style. However, the situation is more complex. As this paper argues, the Supreme Leader’s physical absence from the public sphere should not be equated with declining authority. Rather, his power continues to function through an extensive network of loyal institutions and intermediaries that operate largely behind closed doors, allowing him to maintain and even consolidate control over the regime’s core security and political structures despite heightened external threats.

Concerns about assassination appear to have shaped Khamenei's public profile soon after Israel initiated targeted military operations against senior regime figures and strategic infrastructure in June 2025. He was reportedly moved to a secure bunker and remained largely absent from public and political life for nearly thirty days, a period that proved critical for the Islamic Republic. Since then, his appearances have been less frequent and more tightly managed, as renewed U.S.–Iran tensions have revived speculation about threats to his life and, in some commentary, even the possibility of abduction, drawing comparisons to scenarios previously discussed in relation to Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela.

His prolonged stay in secure underground bunkers has also carried symbolic consequences inside Iran. Among Iranians, this seclusion has led to the mocking nickname “Moushe-Ali,” or “Ali the Mouse,” a sarcastic reference to the perception that the Supreme Leader is hiding from danger rather than confronting it publicly. While such language circulates mainly in informal and opposition circles, it reflects how physical absence from the public eye can shape popular narratives and political ridicule, even when formal authority remains unchanged.

The absence of Khamenei, who holds absolute power in the Islamic Republic, has led to speculation that a decision-making vacuum may be emerging in Iran. Western reporting has suggested that this new status quo could lead to a paradigm shift in the Islamic Republic's policymaking and a reshuffling among the elite. The *Economist*, for example, boldly asserted that Khamenei's power was “diminishing” as a result of his “fading into the shadows.” The *New York Times* even claimed that in Khamenei's absence, “politicians and military commanders were forming alliances and vying for power.” It suggested that Khamenei's reduced presence may embolden other groups or factions within the regime, altering the regime's confrontational stance toward the U.S. and Israel, a course Khamenei has pursued for more than three decades. More recently, an X account attributed to Israel's Mossad claimed that Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Pakpour and former Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, now speaker of the Iranian parliament, were “making decisions” independently of Khamenei.

Visible developments have reinforced this speculation. These include the appointment of Ali Larijani, a traditional conservative familiar to many Western diplomats, as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, and the creation of a new Defense Council. They also include shifts in elite rhetoric, such as Hassan Rouhani's call, for the first time, for a pause in nuclear enrichment, as well as recent statements by former Foreign Minister Javad Zarif promoting "a new approach rooted in domestic reform" and negotiation tied to stopping uranium enrichment.[1]

Yet these signals should not be overinterpreted as evidence of a fundamental change in the Islamic Republic's power structure. The reality is more nuanced. Behind the scenes, a dense and loyal network continues to safeguard the supreme leader's power, ensuring that his hold on the regime remains firmly intact even when he is less visible in public or political arenas.

For more than three decades, the *Bayt-e Rahbari* (also referred to as the Bayt), or Office of the Supreme Leader, has been the single most important entity in the Islamic Republic's policymaking. Despite its centrality and frequent references by Iranian observers, there is remarkably little public information about this secretive and complex institution and relatively little scholarly attention to it. Rooted in religious doctrine, the Bayt has allowed Khamenei not only to influence every major decision but also to personalize the key levers of power throughout the Islamic Republic. And contrary to what is visible on the surface, since the 12-day war, while the supreme leader himself may be absent from the public and political eye, he is exercising power through his Bayt, which has only been tightening its iron grip over the regime.

Drawing on original and primary Persian-language sources, including material obtained from within the regime, this research by United Against Nuclear Iran offers the first comprehensive English-language study of the Bayt (Office of the Supreme Leader), one of the most powerful and least understood institutions in the Islamic Republic.

This paper examines the historical origins of the Bayt; reveals its intricate and clandestine structure and personnel; exposes how it ensures the supreme leader's control over Iran's military, political, economic, and cultural spheres; and examines its role during and after the 12-day war.

The Historical Roots of the Bayt

What has become the most powerful political entity in the Islamic Republic has its roots in Shia Islam's convention surrounding the *Bayt-e Ulema* (House of Religious Scholars).

Based on Shia doctrine, every lay Shia Muslim is required to follow the guidance of a *mojtahed* for everyday life matters. A *mojtahed* is a senior cleric with the rank of ayatollah who possesses the ability and religious authority to conduct *ijtihad*—the doctrine of interpreting religious texts, including the Quran—and make prescriptions based on that interpretation. Once a *mojtahed* becomes popular and develops a following, they earn the title of *marja-e taqhlid* (“source of emulation”) and at this point they establish their own office, or bayt. By convention, the *marja*'s sons and sometimes sons-in-law, or *aghazadehs* (“noble born”), are assigned to help manage their father's office, including overseeing its day-to-day operations, collecting religious taxes, and conveying their father's responses to his followers' questions. This role places the *aghazadehs* in a unique position of authority over their father's matters—something that is reflected in the supreme leader's Bayt today. However, while all *marjas* had their own bayt before 1979, this office was exclusively restricted to religious affairs.



From Religious Office to Political Authority

Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and politicization of religion fundamentally changed the role of the *bayt*. After taking leadership of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's first supreme leader, transformed his Bayt from a solely religious office into a religious-political bureau. The importance of the Bayt in terms of political power was highlighted by the fact that Khomeini's son, Ahmad, who was responsible for managing his father's office, as is customary, became the de facto second-in-command in Iran, the bridge between Khomeini and the rest of the political establishment in the Islamic Republic, and the gateway to the supreme leader. This position gave him unprecedented power over who had his father's ear, something he capitalized on extensively. Evidence even suggests that Ahmad had made several decisions on behalf of his father and forged his father's handwriting and signature to push his own agenda.[2] In fact, the expulsion of Ayatollah Ali Montazeri—who was next in line to succeed Khomeini—took place at Ahmad's behest with the support of Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ali Khamenei, both of whom had promised Ahmad the role of supreme leader in the long term.[3]



Ahmad Khomeini with his father Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeinii

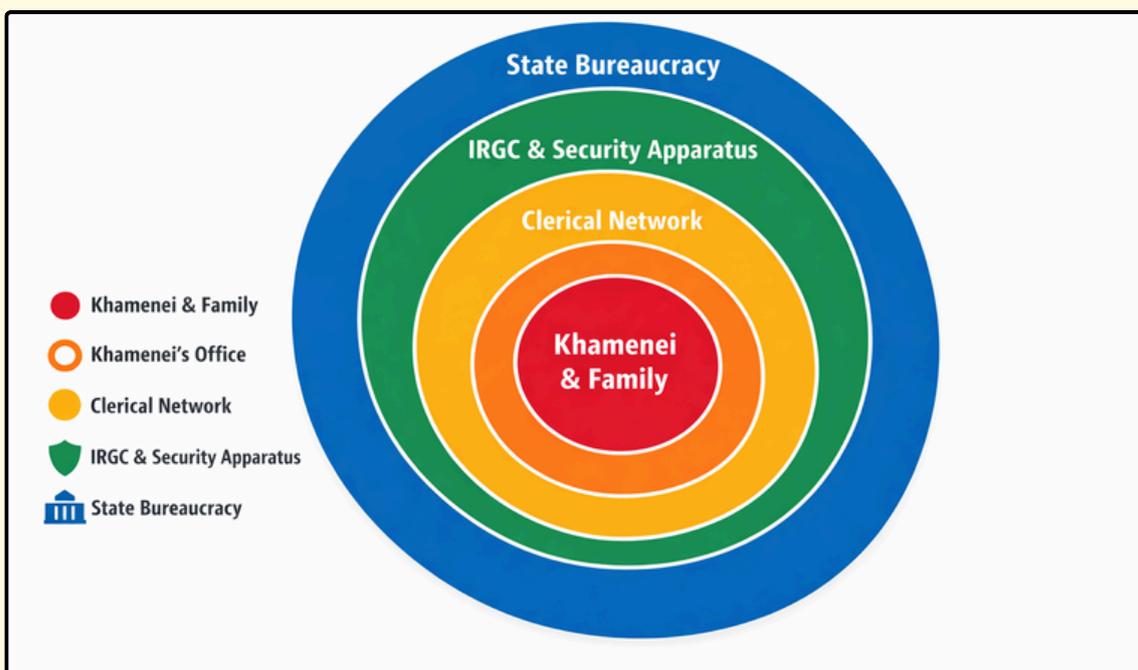
They did not keep this promise, of course—Khamenei and Rafsanjani conspired to ensure that the former would acquire the supreme leadership and the latter the presidency. Consequently, Ahmad began publicly criticizing the regime, which many interpreted as an acknowledgment that Khamenei and Rafsanjani had deceived him.[4] Shortly after, in 1991, Ahmad died under suspicious circumstances. There is strong speculation that he was assassinated on the orders of Khamenei and Rafsanjani by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) after Khamenei's close clerical allies—namely, Ayatollah Khoshvagt, whose daughter is married to Khamenei's son Mustafa, and Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi—issued a fatwa calling for Ahmad's elimination.[5]

The Bayt under Khamenei

Ironically, when Khamenei was selected as supreme leader in a highly engineered appointment in 1989, he was neither a *marja* nor a *mujtahid*. After Khamenei's appointment, the constitution was amended to remove the *marja* status requirement for that office and to strengthen the power of the supreme leader by officially granting him absolute authority over all state affairs through the concept of absolute velayat-e faqih (absolute clerical guardianship over the state).[6] However, just months after he assumed the supreme leadership, Khamenei was artificially awarded the rank of ayatollah and prematurely declared a *mujtahid*.

Within two months of assuming the supreme leadership and gaining the *mujtahid* title, Khamenei established his Bayt by appointing several loyal clerics with security and military backgrounds. Two of the most significant picks were Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, who served as Khomeini's representative in the Artesh (regular army) and as a parliamentary deputy for MOIS, and Seyyed Ali Asghar Hejazi, who was deputy minister of foreign affairs in MOIS.

In 1994, following the deaths of several grand ayatollahs, including Mohammad Ali Araki and Mohammad-Reza Golpayegani, Khamenei was awarded marja status by the Society of Teachers of the Scientific Seminars of Qom (*jaameh modaresin-e howzeye elmi-e qom*) after exerting political pressure and manipulating the Qom seminary through his authority and office.[7]



Informal Political Infrastructure in Iran

Structure of Khamenei's Bayt

The essence of Khamenei's Bayt would be unprecedented in terms of size and scale, even compared to his predecessor's. Under Khamenei, the Bayt would transform into a political giant, parallel to the three branches of power and the state bureaucracy. Its growth is underscored by the fact that it now has more than 4,000 employees in its core office and more than 40,000 working under its affiliated umbrella.[8]

Ayatollah Mohammadi Golpayegani—whose son later married one of Khamenei's daughters—serves as the executive of the supreme leader's office. Second to him is Seyyed Ali Asghar Hejazi (also known as Mir-Hejazi), Khamenei's deputy chief of staff and the Bayt's top security and intelligence figure.

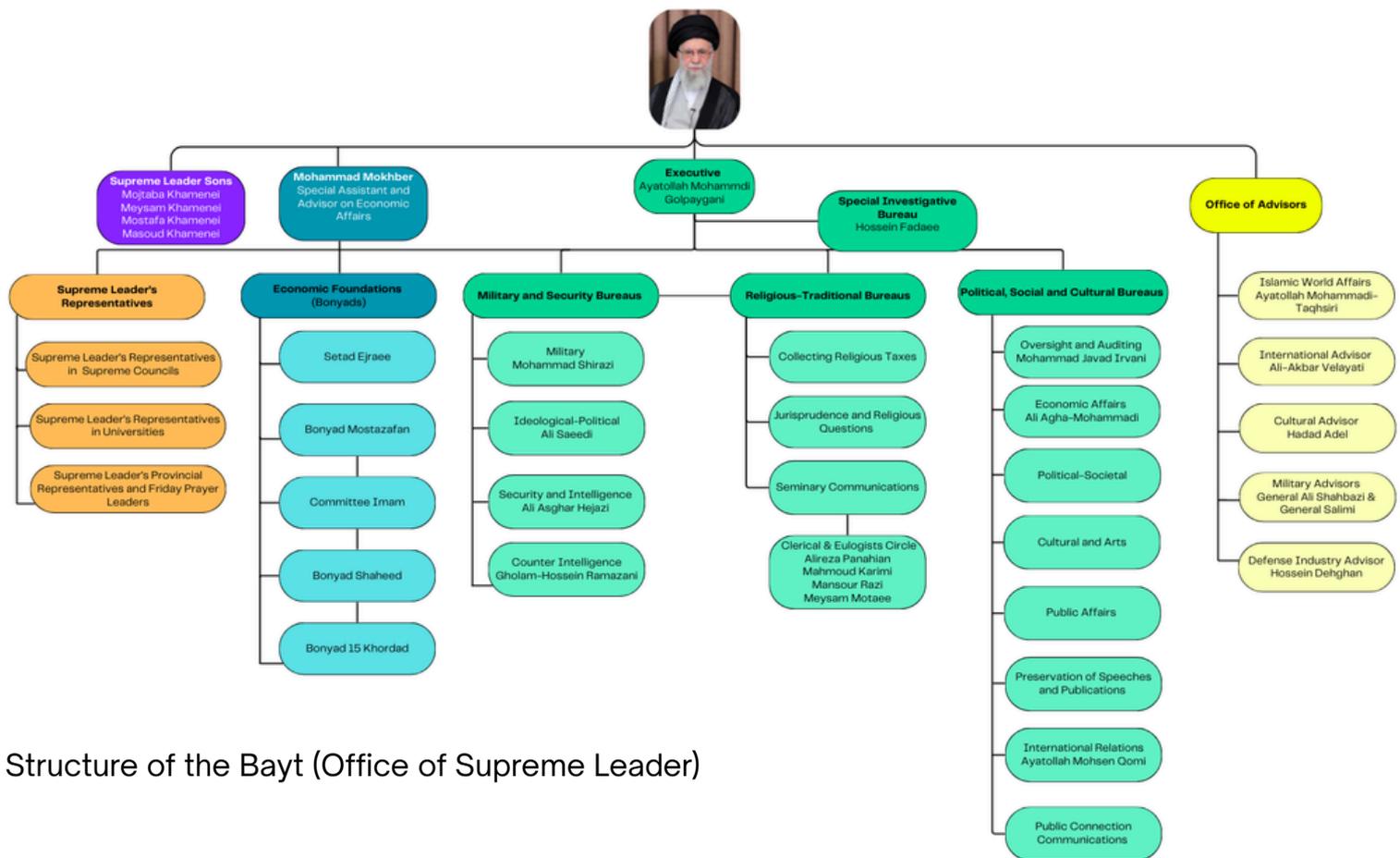
The supreme leader's Bayt has been intentionally organized and structured like a dark and tangled web—complex in design and opaque in its workings.[9] This is partly a result of changes in response to domestic and international developments.



Ayatollah Mohammadi Golpayegani.



Seyyed Ali Asghar Hejazi



Structure of the Bayt (Office of Supreme Leader)

The Office of the Supreme Leader has several key deputies. One of these is the Deputy for Special Affairs, headed by Hossein Fadaee, a hardline former member of the IRGC. The Deputy for Oversight and Auditing (*moavant-e nezarat va hezab resi dafater*) is mandated to resolve disputes between organs under the control of Khamenei. In 2017–18, this deputy intervened to resolve conflicts between two Khamenei-run slush funds, Bonyad Mostazafan and Setad Ejaee.

Other deputy positions include Deputy for Security and Intelligence; Deputy of Cultural Affairs, who controls and oversees Iran's state broadcaster; Deputy for Communication and International Relations, who manages the Supreme Leader's representatives abroad; and Deputy for Special Affairs. The Deputy for Public Relations, Deputy for Preservation of Writings and Publications of the Supreme Leader—a position held by Khamenei's son, Massoud, who, among other things, is responsible for running the Supreme Leader's websites in different languages.

Alongside the deputy roles, several institutions operate under the Bayt umbrella, including the “Islamic Revolution Institution” publishing house, which Massoud Khamenei directs.

Adding to the Bayt’s shadowy nature, that office has been consistently expanding over the past three decades, reflecting the supreme leader’s aim to personalize every aspect of power in the Islamic Republic. The intent to use the Bayt to control the presidency of Rafsanjani and later Mohammad Khatami led Khamenei to embed an office in the Bayt parallel to every government ministry, including foreign affairs, oil, and education.

The goal of these offices is to supervise government institutions and the state bureaucracy, ensuring that all major decisions and administrative processes remain aligned with the Supreme Leader’s preferences. Through this oversight structure, they reinforce his supremacy across the political system and maintain his ultimate authority over the state’s most important affairs.

For example, in 2020, Seyed Ali Moqadam, the head of the Deputy for Public Relations, intervened to object to the Tehran City Council’s cooperation with independent NGOs whose political orientations were “unclear” or potentially inconsistent with the values of the Islamic Republic in efforts to contain the coronavirus.[10]

Despite this structure, the true powerbrokers are Khamenei’s four sons: Mostafa, Mojtaba, Masoud, and Meysam, all of whom were young when their father received *marja-e taqlid* status. Among them, the second-oldest son, Mojtaba, has shown particular interest in security and military matters and effectively serves as a mini-supreme leader within his father’s office.[11]



Left to right and clockwise:

Mostafa Khamenei Born: early 1960s

Oldest son keeps a low public profile.



Mojtaba Khamenei Born: 1969

Considered the most politically influential, often described as his father's potential successor.



Masoud Khamenei Born: mid-1970s

Known for having distanced himself somewhat from political affairs.

Meysam Khamenei Born: 1977

Youngest son; active in cultural and religious projects.

Control over the Armed Forces

In addition to its offices parallel to the state bureaucracy, the supreme leader's Bayt also comprises several bureaus responsible for controlling and overseeing military institutions. While not in the public eye and distinct from the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is the highest military authority on paper, these military institutions embedded within the Bayt hold supreme de facto authority.

First, separate from the armed forces of the Islamic Republic, the Bayt has its own Military Office of the Supreme Leader, headed by Brig. Gen. Mohammad Shirazi, who serves as the liaison between the military and Khamenei. Any military official in Iran seeking promotion beyond the rank of second brigadier must obtain approval from this office.[12] Shirazi was appointed due to his personal and family ties and his relationship with Khamenei, not for merit. Khamenei regularly deploys Shirazi to make strategic military decisions and deliver key addresses. [13] Shirazi was not a career military officer; he was selected primarily because of his close personal and family relationship with Khamenei. He was then given a high military rank, much like Maj. Gen. Seyyed Hassan Firouzabadi, a veterinarian before the revolution with no formal military background, whom Khamenei appointed as the first Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff.

The second key military oversight body is the Counterintelligence Office in the Bayt, headed by hardline Islamist cleric and IRGC member Hojatoleslam Gholam-Hosseini Ramazani, who is at the top of the counterintelligence organization in every military security institution.[14] Ramazani, who served as the former head of Iran's police (NAJA) and IRGC counterintelligence, is one of the most trusted shadowy men in Khamenei's circle. [15]

Lastly, Ayatollah Ali Saeedi serves as the Supreme Leader's representative across Iran's armed forces. Saeedi, a former counterintelligence executive in the IRGC and later Khamenei's representative in the Guards, belongs to the supreme leader's personal circle. In his role, Saeedi oversees all indoctrination, recruitment, and policies throughout the Iranian military.

Through these three military offices in the Bayt, Khamenei has been able to purge Iran's armed forces from the moment he became the supreme leader and to transform the IRGC into a praetorian and personalistic army. This was Khamenei's focus during the first decade of his supreme leadership, with these bodies enabling him to instil a cult of personality within the IRGC's ranks and ensure it is an ideologically compliant force.[16]



Brigadier General Mohammad Shirazi



Hojatolislam Gholam-Hossein Ramazani



Ayatollah Ali Saeedi

Control over Seminary Schools

Khamenei controls Iran's seminary schools (*howzeh-ye elmiyeh*) through his Bayt and employs a layered strategy of bureaucratization, cooptation, and coercion. After becoming Supreme Leader in 1989, Khamenei sought to enhance his limited clerical standing by establishing a comprehensive administrative structure to regulate nearly every aspect of clerical life—from admissions and curricula to health insurance and the right to wear clerical attire. He institutionalized this control by establishing the Supreme Council of the Seminary, staffed by clerics whom he personally appoints, and the Center for the Management of Seminaries, which oversees and standardizes seminary education nationwide.[17]

Beyond bureaucratic oversight, Khamenei has heavily relied on the Clerical Basij, a militia embedded within seminaries, to monitor dissent, promote loyalty, and silence critics. The Basij acts as both an ideological filter and an enforcement mechanism, ensuring students and teachers follow the official line. The Basij clerics have also been used to attack dissenting clerics who criticize Khamenei. Coordination with these individuals usually happens through the Bayt, which employs them as foot soldiers in suppressing alternative religious authorities. [18]



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei addresses Qom seminary students in 2016.

Khamenei's Bayt has a local branch in the city of Qom (*daftar-e magham-e mo'azzam-e rahbari*). Because Qom is the primary center of Shia religious seminaries and scholarship in Iran, this branch serves as the supreme leader's administrative nerve center and primary point of contact for dealing with the city's powerful clerical establishments, religious institutions, and seminaries.

By embedding surveillance, patronage, and paramilitary structures into the *howzeh*, Khamenei has transformed seminaries from once-autonomous centers of Shia learning into extensions of the state, creating a new class of clerics who are as much security operatives as religious scholars. This system guarantees that the only legitimate voice in Iran's seminaries is that of the supreme leader himself.

Control over Politics, Security, and Culture

The role of Khamenei's Bayt gradually expanded beyond religious and military affairs to become the core nucleus of Iran's political, security, and cultural policymaking.

Under the Khatami administration (1997–2004), for example, the so-called reformist faction actively sought to undermine the supreme leader's authority. Khamenei responded by creating within the Bayt a parallel security and intelligence organization (*etelaat-e movazi*) headed by Ali Asghar Hejazi, a hardline cleric who had served as deputy for foreign intelligence at MOIS under Khomeini. Khamenei mandated that Hejazi implement a new wave of repression against the reformist political elites and their affiliates, aiming to neutralize any challenges to the supreme leader's reign. This subsequently resulted in the detention of reformist-aligned thought leaders and academics, as well as a string of other detainments and assassinations, including the attempted killing of Saeed Hajjarian, an advisor to President Khatami.

These actions were carried out effectively by Bayt's informal security and intelligence groups, along with affiliated military and disciplinary organizations. This includes the Police counterintelligence units led by IRGC Gen. Mohammad Reza Naghdi, as well as informal networks like the Habib Ring. Mojtaba Khamenei commands the Habib Ring, which includes members from his previous IRGC battalion, the Habib Battalion.[19] One key member, Brig. Gen. Hassan Mohagegh, an important decision-maker in Khamenei's intelligence bodies in the Bayt, was later promoted to second-in-command of the IRGC intelligence organization before being killed in the 12-day war between Iran and Israel.

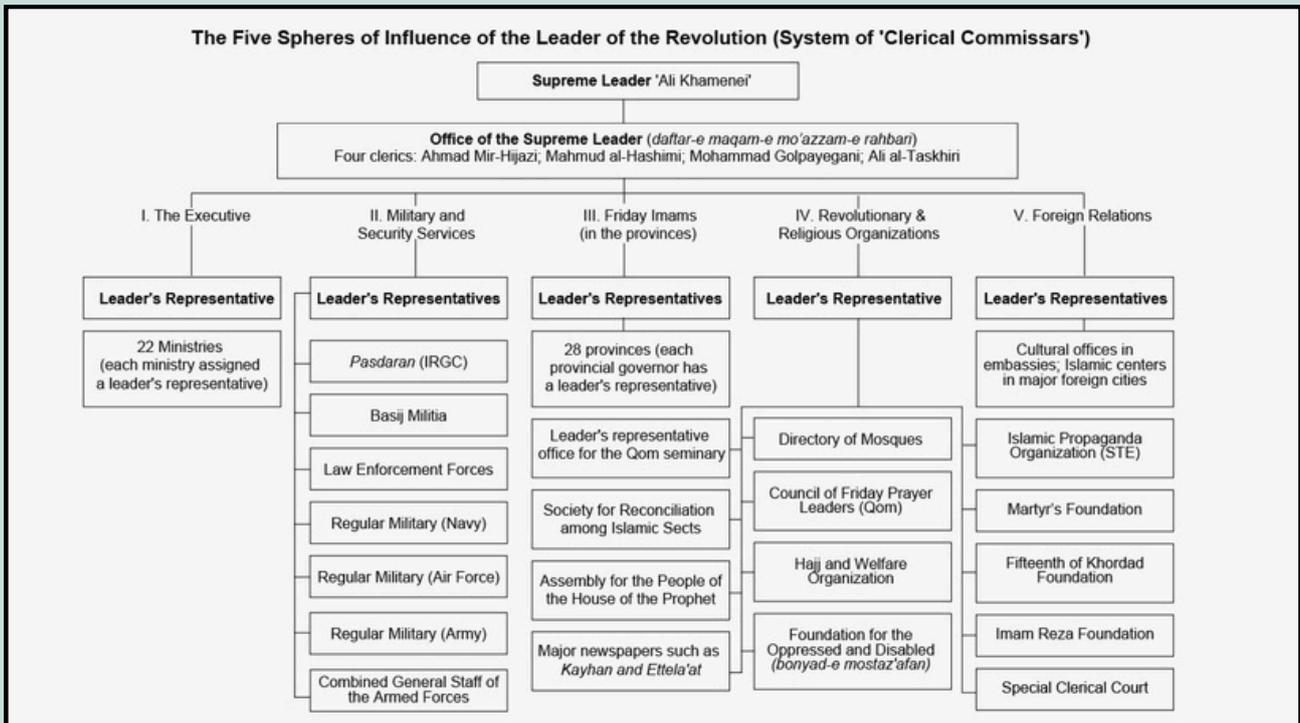


Diagram sourced from Wilfred Buchta 1999, "Who Rules Iran?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy

The Bayt has also been key in shaping the regime's cultural policymaking decisions. In 2000, pressure from Khamenei led to the resignation of Khatami's first cultural minister, who was accused of "permissiveness" and of undermining Islamic culture.

Around the same time, Mojtaba Khamenei also began meddling in the affairs of the Islamic Propaganda Organization (IPO), a body under his father's direct authority. In 2002, Mojtaba's behind-the-scenes actions led to the head of the IPO being replaced by one of Mojtaba's close allies, Hojatoleslam Khamooshi, who would go on to lead the IPO for more than 17 years.[21] Mojtaba's interference and de facto control over the office of the IPO head persisted for decades, as recently as 2019, when Mojtaba orchestrated the installation of his close ally and friend, Mohammad Qomi, to that post.[21]

Starting in 2003, Khamenei's Bayt began to play an active political role in engineering election outcomes, not least facilitating Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rise to the presidency two years later. In fact, Mehdi Kahroubi—a 2005 presidential candidate—openly accused Mojtaba of manufacturing the electoral outcome to ensure Ahmadinejad's rise, declaring that the election was the work of Khamenei's second son, the "aghazadeh" (noble-born).[22] The Supreme Leader responded to Kahroubi's allegation

by declaring that his son was “noble,” not a “noble-born,” in an expression of support and backing of his son’s role in the Bayt.[23] This endorsement would result in Mojtaba doubling down on the Bayt’s meddling in political affairs across the Islamic Republic.

Indeed, the unprecedented electoral rigging in the 2009 presidential election was spearheaded and orchestrated by Mojtaba and the Bayt. As protests erupted in response, Khamenei’s second son would transform himself into the unofficial supreme security commander to control the repression of demonstrators. [24] Reports even indicate that Mojtaba held key security sessions with senior IRGC commanders inside the Bayt, with the supreme leader’s son micromanaging how the Guards crushed Iranians on the street.[25]

However, the Bayt’s interference in key political decisions has not been limited to vote-rigging. The record-speed parliamentary ratification of the 2015 nuclear agreement—which concluded in just 20 minutes—was the work of Ali Asghar Hejazi, the head of the Bayt’s intelligence bureau, who instructed parliament Speaker Ali Larijani to ensure the nuclear deal was passed quickly because Khamenei had already approved it.[26]



Mojtaba Khamenei with former commander of the IRGC’s Basij Militia IRGC commander Mohammad Reza Naghdi

Control over the Universities

Ayatollah Khamenei has also solidified his influence in Iran's universities and government bureaucracy by appointing personal representatives (*namayande-ye vali-ye faqih*) who serve as his eyes, ears, and enforcers within these institutions. His representatives lead the Supreme Leader's Office in Universities, which manages ideological training, supervises Islamic student organizations, and monitors faculty and students for signs of dissent.[27] These offices, located at nearly every major university, ensure that the curriculum and academic environment support the doctrine of the guardianship of the jurist, often limiting academic freedom and silencing voices advocating reform. Hojatoleslam Mostafa Rostami, the head of this institution, has been appointed by Khamenei and reports directly to the supreme leader.

In the state bureaucracy, Khamenei's envoys are embedded throughout ministries, provincial administrations, and key state organizations, acting as both political commissars and moral overseers. They not only vet appointments and policies to ensure loyalty to the supreme leader but also distribute patronage and privileges to pro-regime loyalists, thereby binding the professional class to the ideological regime. By establishing this parallel chain of command, Khamenei has created a control mechanism that bypasses formal hierarchies, effectively turning universities into centers for regime indoctrination and transforming the bureaucracy into an extension of his personal authority.

In each province, Khamenei appoints a representative who typically also serves as the Friday prayer leader of the provincial capital city, granting the official both political authority and religious legitimacy. The representatives also have the right to collect religious taxes, such as khums and zakat, thereby strengthening their financial independence and influence. In practice, their orders, if issued within the scope of authority delegated by the supreme leader, are binding, making opposition to them equivalent to opposition to Khamenei himself. Through this vast network of representatives—embedded in every key institution of governance, education, and religious life—Khamenei has created a parallel chain of command that ensures his presence is felt in every corner of the Islamic Republic.



Street protests in January 2026. [Street protests](#)text

Control Over Iran's Economy

Economically, the Bayt controls almost all aspects of Iran's economy through a network of foundations and para-state organizations, the most important one being *Setad-e Ejraiye Farman-e Imam* (EIKO/Setad), which was formally created in 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini's decree to administer properties deemed "abandoned" or "illicit" after the 1979 revolution. Setad evolved from a short-term custodial body into a sprawling holding network under the supreme leader's direct control. A Reuters investigation estimated Setad's holdings at roughly \$95 billion as of 2013, detailing how it systematically seized properties—often through court orders—and then sold, leased, or folded them into its corporate portfolio.[28]

Organizationally, Setad operates through interlocking subsidiaries and foundations that invest across various sectors, including finance, real estate, telecom, energy, and health care. Its charitable arm, the Barakat Foundation, and its pharma platform, Shifa Pharmed, within the Barakat Pharmaceutical Group, illustrate how social-welfare branding sits alongside commercial expansion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Setad launched trials and production of the COVIran Barekat vaccine, utilizing the project as both a health initiative and a political signal of self-sufficiency.[29]

Setad's comparative advantage lies in legal insulation and opacity. Its operations broadly fall outside parliamentary or audit oversight, operating “off budget” and shielded from scrutiny. The United States has repeatedly targeted this network. The U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned 37 Setad-linked firms in 2013, and Executive Order 13876 (2019) explicitly authorized sanctions on the Bayt.

Beyond Setad, the supreme leader exercises authority through an ecosystem of religious and charitable foundations known as *bonyads*. These quasi-public institutions answer to him rather than to the presidency, allowing resource flows to occur outside civilian oversight, serving as both welfare distributors and hubs of political patronage.[30]

Estimates vary, but *bonyads* are thought to account for up to 20 percent of Iran's GDP, making them among the most prominent actors in Iran's semi-state economy.[31] Furthermore, some Iranian observers have claimed that all entities under the supreme leader’s supervision, including both military institutions (such as the IRGC) and non-military foundations, account for 60–65 percent of Iran’s GDP.[32]

Their economic weight is matched by opacity, enabling them to serve as vehicles for elite enrichment, regime consolidation, and international circumvention. *Bonyads* are neither traditional ministries nor private companies. They hold a unique parastatal role with several key features: they are directly controlled by the Supreme Leader; their head is appointed by and answerable only to the Supreme Leader, shielding the foundation from parliamentary or executive oversight; and *bonyads*’ finances are not regularly audited, and public disclosures are minimal. This lack of transparency has led to accusations of corruption, favoritism, and mismanagement. While they control a large part of Iran's economy, the *bonyads* have enjoyed special tax privileges for decades. Although reforms have periodically aimed to reduce these benefits, the foundation still holds advantages that private companies do not.



(left) Parviz Fattah, Chairman of Setad, (center) Ayatollah Golpayegani, (right) Mohammad Mokhber

Essentially, the *bonyads* serve as both an economic powerhouse and a political tool, directing resources to maintain regime loyalty. The *bonyads*' dual identity as charities and conglomerates has generated controversy. Rather than uplifting the poor—their stated objective—they enrich networks of elites connected to the regime, serving as an economic arm of the supreme leader's office.

One of the most significant *bonyads* is the Bonyad-e Mostazafan Enghelab-e Eslami (BMEE), which is one of Iran's largest conglomerates and holds substantial interests in construction, mining, tourism, energy, finance, and logistics. In November 2020, the U.S. Treasury Department, in sanctioning BMEE, described it as an "immense conglomerate" with 160 subsidiaries and a patronage network for the supreme leader. [33]

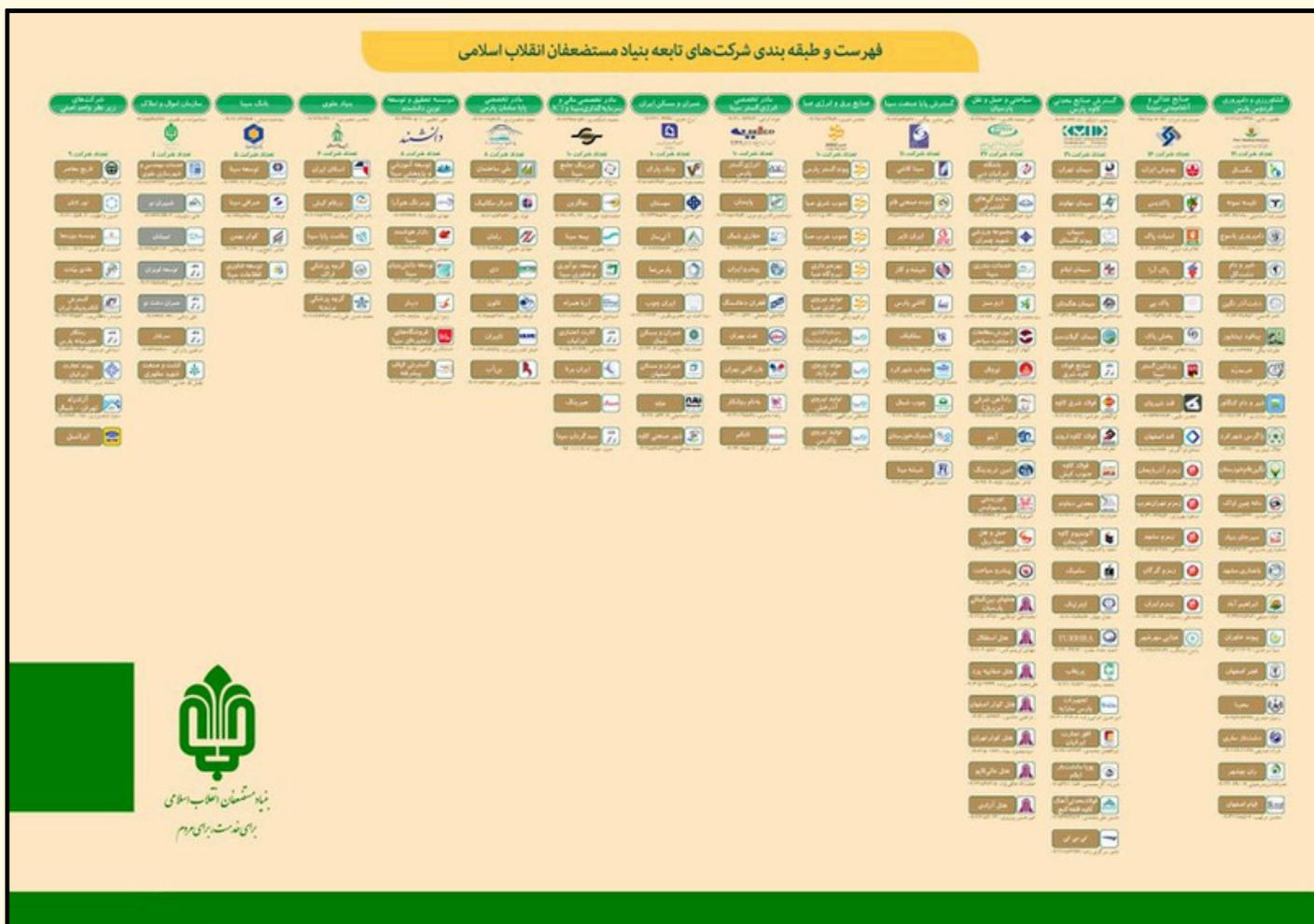
While presented as a charitable foundation tasked with supporting the poor and disadvantaged, in practice, BMEE operates as a sprawling state-owned conglomerate. Its reach extends across nearly every sector of the Iranian economy, and it is often described as a "state within a state," functioning with extraordinary autonomy under the direct supervision of the supreme leader.

Founded in March 1979, just weeks after the Islamic Revolution, BMEE was established by decree of Ayatollah Khomeini.[34] Its initial mandate was to seize and administer the wealth of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, his family, and their close associates. These confiscated assets included banks, hotels, factories, and extensive real estate holdings. The foundation's stated mission was to redistribute this wealth to benefit the poor and oppressed (*mostazafan*), a revolutionary constituency central to the new regime's legitimacy.

Over the course of four decades, BMEE has evolved from a custodian of confiscated wealth into Iran's second-largest economic enterprise, trailing only the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). Its holdings are vast, diversified, and organized into sectoral “holdings” that control subsidiaries across industries:

- **Real Estate and Construction:** Through firms such as Maskan Sazan and Shahed Construction & Development Co., BMEE ranks among Iran’s largest landowners and a dominant player in urban development.
- **Finance and Banking:** The foundation holds significant stakes in Sina Bank and Sina Insurance, and maintains connections with state banks such as Bank Melli, Bank Mellat, and Bank Tejarat.
- **Industry and Mining:** BMEE’s portfolio includes companies in steel, cement, and automotive manufacturing, such as Iran Khodro, SAIPA, Pars Khodro, and heavy industries like Machine Sazi Arak and HEPCO.
- **Energy and Power:** Subsidiaries such as Sepahan Oil, Pars Oil, and Behran Oil, as well as investments in the MAPNA Group and the South Pars project, position BMEE at the core of Iran’s energy sector.

- **Food and Agriculture:** The foundation manages leading brands, including Zamzam Cola, Kalleh Dairy, Pegah Dairy Industries, Mahram Food Products, Behnoush Iran (beverages), and Zar Macaron.
- **Tourism and Recreation:** BMEE owns Iran's major hotel chains, including the Parsian International Hotels Group, Homa, Laleh, and Esteghlal, as well as iconic leisure facilities such as Dizin and Shemshak ski resorts and Tochal Telecabin.
- **Transportation:** The foundation controls transportation entities, including Iran Air (Homa), Mahan Air, Qeshm Air, Zagros Airlines, as well as shipping and rail enterprises such as Valfajr Shipping and Raja Rail Transportation.
- **ICT and Media:** Through subsidiaries such as Asiatech and Pars Online, BMEE has entered the telecoms and IT sectors. It also exerts control over cultural and media outlets such as Fars News Agency, the Hamshahri Institute, and the Islamic Propagation Organization.



The sheer breadth of this portfolio makes the foundation a dominant player in Iran's semi-state economy, often crowding out private competitors.

These foundations often consult the Supreme Leader's Office and report their decisions exclusively to the Bayt, even on minor matters. One leaked report in 2022 from BMEE, sent directly to Ali Asghar Hejazi described the foundation's performance during the Arbaeen Pilgrimage to Karbala, Iraq, detailing how many individuals they deployed and sites they managed to service Shia pilgrims. There is no accountability for the *bonyads*, which operate as Khamenei's slush fund, beyond these direct reports to the Bayt.[35]



(left) Parviz Fattah, (center) Ayatollah Golpayegani, (right) Hossein Dehghan, Head of BMEE

Astan-e Quds Razavi

Astan-e Quds Razavi (AQR), the custodian of the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad, also operates as a diversified entity through its Razavi Economic Organization, which is under the control of the Supreme Leader and his office. AQR controls over 70 companies spanning oil and gas, engineering, agriculture, automotive manufacturing, and finance. The U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned AQR in January 2021, framing it as another pillar of the supreme leader's financial empire.[36]

Other major foundations include the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, sanctioned in 2010 for channeling funds to Hezbollah, and the Martyrs Foundation (*bonyad-e shahid*), which provides benefits to families of fallen fighters but also funds regime-backed proxies and groups abroad. These cases show how “charitable” institutions frequently overlap with the regime's security and foreign policy apparatus.

Inside the Bayt, the Bureau of Economic Affairs—led by Ali Agha Mohammadi, a member of the Expediency Discernment Council and the head of the Bayt’s economic task force—makes numerous key financial decisions, ranging from oil contracts to cyber platforms. For instance, after the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, when European companies like Total entered Iran's economy, the involvement of figures such as Agha Mohammadi carried significant political implications and signified high-level oversight. Through Agha Mohammadi, the supreme leader's office established the macro framework for these contracts by setting boundaries and principles, ensuring that the office directly benefits from these agreements. His presence at the Total contract signing—not as a government representative but a close associate of the Bayt—was both symbolic and strategic. His attendance signaled approval from top authorities, conveying to Total that the contract had strong political support and simultaneously reassuring domestic critics.

All these economic foundations grant the supreme leader unparalleled autonomy in resources, organization, and politics. They generate billions of dollars in revenue outside official budgetary sources, funding his patronage network and ideological programs.

Factional Contours Inside the Bayt

While the Bayt is often portrayed as a single, unified apparatus that implements the will of Ayatollah Khamenei, in practice, it operates through a web of actors, institutions, and networks that compete for influence. These rivalries remain contained within the boundaries of loyalty to the supreme leader, but they nonetheless shape elections, appointments, and policy priorities.

One of the clearest moments revealing these internal divides emerged during the 2024 presidential election. Among the leading contenders were Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Saeed Jalili, and Masoud Pezeshkian.

While Pezeshkian was presented as a so-called reformist-leaning candidate who could bring opposition voters to the polls, his candidacy was ultimately designed to preserve the system's legitimacy. It did not challenge the supreme leader's red lines. The more telling fault line was between Ghalibaf and Jalili, two figures firmly ensconced in the conservative establishment and close to the Bayt.

Within the Bayt, different currents supported different candidates. It has been reported that young hardliners within the Bayt backed Jalili, whose reputation rests on a strict ideological stance, deep skepticism of the West, and a long record as national security advisor and nuclear negotiator.

However, other influential players inside the Bayt—including, according to insiders, Khamenei himself—favored Ghalibaf.^[37] A former IRGC commander and Tehran mayor, and current parliament speaker, Ghalibaf is viewed as more pragmatic and managerial in style, with strong operational ties to the IRGC bureaucracy.^[38]

The fact that both men were viable, regime-approved candidates demonstrates that the Bayt tolerates, and even uses, controlled internal competition. So long as contenders remain loyal to Khamenei and to the survival of the system, factional rivalry is permitted. This competition appears to offer political pluralism while ensuring that no single bloc becomes powerful enough to act independently of the supreme leader.



Saeed Jalili, Masoud Pezeshkian and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf.

These divides reflect deeper institutional and policy differences: ideological purity versus technocratic governance; hardline isolation versus cautious engagement; political dogmatism versus managerial efficiency. But such distinctions operate within a tightly managed structure of appointments, patronage, and vetting bodies linked directly to the Bayt. In that sense, the Bayt's authority rests less on Khamenei's visibility and more on the networks and gatekeeping mechanisms that guarantee control from above.

Another revealing moment came in 2019, when Vahid Jalili, Saeed Jalili's brother and a cultural activist, who later became the deputy head of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), published an open letter criticizing "one of the deputies of the Leader's office," namely Hossein Mohammadi, who is responsible for cultural issues in the Bayt. Jalili decried that a small group within the Bayt was making major cultural decisions, but that all of these were failing, pointing to the IRIB's performance. However, Jalili's challenge was not directed at Khamenei, but at a group within the Bayt that he believed was implementing misguided policies in the name of the supreme leader.[39]

The reaction was swift. Conservative outlets and Mohammad Hossein Saffar-Harandi—an IRGC member and former culture minister under Ahmadinejad— attacked Jalili’s claims, defending Mohammadi’s record and accusing Jalili of distorting cultural policy. Rather than resolving the dispute through transparent channels of responsibility, the conflict spilled into competing public statements, highlighting how factional disputes within the Bayt are often managed through informal pressure, media signaling, and personal networks rather than formal accountability.

These episodes reveal two structural realities. First, beyond Khamenei, lines of authority within the Bayt are opaque, even to the political elite, providing the space for insider competition between younger radicals and older conservative generations. Like other authoritarian regimes, this competition is over winning Khamenei’s ear and trust rather than over power per se, which is held in absolute form by the supreme leader himself. Second, because oversight is discretionary, policy disagreements can escalate into public signaling battles that the Bayt must later contain. In short, the Bayt’s centralized power coexists with factional contestation beneath the surface, and the ambiguity surrounding deputies’ roles provides space for internal competition despite outward unity.

Conclusion

While some observers interpreted Ayatollah Khamenei's limited public presence after the 12-day war with Israel as a sign of a looming power vacuum, in reality, it underscored something very different. His absence revealed the extent of the institutional infrastructure that safeguards his authority and allows the system to function without his constant visibility.

Over the last few decades, the Bayt-e Rahbari has grown into the regime's hidden nerve center, functioning as both a political and an economic empire. It is the mechanism through which the supreme leader's control extends across the military, the security establishment, and Iran's cultural and economic landscape. This shadowy institution, which began as a traditional religious office, has evolved into the supreme leader's actual seat of power, operating as a sprawling parallel state that commands the military, directs security operations, steers economic policy, and enforces ideological conformity. The Bayt guarantees that Khamenei's authority will remain intact even when he is absent, underscoring the durability of the Islamic Republic's authoritarian system.

The Bayt is not merely an extension of the Supreme Leader's will; it has become the embodiment of his authority. By embedding parallel institutions to oversee ministries, by cultivating an intelligence and security apparatus to suppress opposition, and by controlling vast economic conglomerates, the Bayt ensures that the supreme leader's dominance is not dependent on his physical presence. It is this structure—layered, opaque, and entrenched—that makes the Islamic Republic uniquely resilient to external and internal shocks.

Consequently, to view Khamenei's reduced visibility as an opening for reform or fragmentation within the regime is to misunderstand the system he has engineered. The supreme leader today is no longer just one man; he is represented through an all-encompassing institution that consolidates power, manages succession, and guarantees continuity. As long as the Bayt exists in its current form, a genuine change in Iran's political trajectory remains highly

improbable. The Islamic Republic's most enduring strength lies in this hidden architecture of control, which will continue to shape the country's future long after Khamenei himself departs from the scene.

For U.S. and regional policymakers, this reality carries direct implications. Western narratives of elite fragmentation or imminent reform underestimate the Bayt's central role in consolidating power. The institution's deep entanglement in military decision-making, electoral engineering, and economic patronage ensures regime cohesion amid domestic dissent and external pressure. It is not Khamenei the man, but the Bayt as an institution, that provides durability and continuity, from the suppression of elite and public dissent to the manipulation of nuclear negotiations.

As long as the Bayt remains intact, meaningful political transformation inside Iran is unlikely. The idea that Khamenei's reduced public and political visibility has created a power vacuum risks misreading the regime's internal architecture. Instead, policymakers must recognize the Bayt as the enduring nerve center of Iran's theo-military state, an institution capable of outlasting its founder and ensuring continuity of the Islamic Republic's confrontational posture toward the United States and its regional adversaries. For any meaningful change to occur in the Islamic Republic—including regime change—the Bayt and its extensive apparatus must be significantly weakened through a combination of sanctions, cyber operations, and military measures. Until this takes place, the supreme leader's iron grip over the regime will endure, regardless of Khamenei's disappearances.

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