

# IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PRIMER

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## TIMELINE

Iranian presidential elections happen every four years and follow a strict sequence. The first phase is registration, which this year lasted from April 10 to 14. During that time, over 1,600 candidates formally registered. Yet only six candidates, all of them male, were approved to run<sup>1</sup> by Iran's Guardian Council, the organ<sup>2</sup> that vets candidates for public office.<sup>3</sup> The next phase – which we are currently in – is the campaign phase. This year's campaign period lasts from April 28 to May 17, with campaigning not permitted on May 18, the day before the election.<sup>4</sup> The final phase is election day, which is May 19.<sup>5</sup> Should no candidate attain a majority of votes on election day, a runoff contest between the two frontrunners will be held a week later.<sup>6</sup>

## ELECTIONS IN IRAN

While the Islamic Republic is both illiberal and autocratic, the country allows for narrow but competitive<sup>7</sup> elections for select positions, like many authoritarian regimes. These contests serve different parts of the Iranian polity. For the establishment, they are an opportunity to flaunt “popular legitimacy” and remind domestic and international audiences that they remain the product of a social revolution. Hardline Iranian elites vehemently believe that the

1. Tzvi Kahn, “Iran's Presidential Election and the Role of Women,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 21, 2017. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/tzvi-kahn-irans-presidential-election-and-the-role-of-women/>)
2. A 12-member body indirectly and directly picked by the supreme leader.
3. See Chapter 5 of: “Presidential Electoral Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Iran Data Portal*, accessed May 3, 2017. ([http://irandatportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/presidential\\_electoral\\_law.pdf](http://irandatportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/presidential_electoral_law.pdf)); Ali Alfoneh, “Iran's Expendable President Rouhani,” *World Affairs Journal*, July 31, 2105. (<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/iran%E2%80%99s-expendable-president-rouhani>)
4. For phases, see: “۲۲ تا ۲۶ فروردین ۹۶؛ زمان ثبت نام کاندیداهای انتخابات ریاست جمهوری” (The 22nd to the 26 of Farvardin '96; The Time for Registration of Presidential Candidates), *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), August 12, 2016. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/05/22/1155640/22-تا-26-فروردین-96-زمان-ثبت-نام-کاندیداهای-انتخابات-ریاست-جمهوری>)
5. Parisa Hafezi, “Heavy security in Tehran as campaigning starts for Iran's May presidential vote,” *Reuters*, April 21, 2017. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-campaign-idUSKBN17N1BR>)
6. See Articles 13 and 14 of, “Presidential Electoral Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Iran Data Portal*, accessed May 3, 2017. ([http://irandatportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/presidential\\_electoral\\_law.pdf](http://irandatportal.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/presidential_electoral_law.pdf))
7. Scholars of competitive authoritarianism have classified the Islamic Republic as a “tutelary regime” where certain unelected bodies (rather than the military as is the case in most tutelary regimes) have veto power over elected ones. See: Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), page 14. However, the formal “regime type” Iran fits into has long presented a challenge. See discussion in: Daniel Nexon, “Iran, competitive authoritarian regimes, and fraud,” *The Duck of Minerva*, June 13, 2009. (<http://duckofminerva.com/2009/06/iran-competitive-authoritarian-regimes.html>)

electoral process *matters more* than any personality the process can produce.<sup>8</sup> For the Iranian people, however, elections have always been a choice between options that range from “bad to worse”<sup>9</sup> since the Guardian Council determines who may run.

## THE IRANIAN PRESIDENCY

By constitutional decree, the president is the country’s second most powerful official.<sup>10</sup> However, as an elected official, the president is checked by a host of unelected institutions, at the apex of which sits the supreme leader. The supreme leader retains the constitutional authority and power to override the president through formal and informal means, the latter of which consists of public rebuke or behind-the-scene maneuvers made relatively easy by the supreme leader’s vast shadow government.

The Iranian president is not the commander-in-chief. In fact, Iran’s military command and control bypasses the office of the president in favor of the supreme leader.<sup>11</sup> And in the realm of foreign policy, the president’s powers are now limited to rhetoric and the personnel he appoints to his cabinet. The president can amend the country’s tactics, not strategies.

## CANDIDATE BACKGROUNDS

### Incumbent: Hassan Rouhani (age 68)

- **Current Position:** President
- **Background:** Cleric
- **Hometown:** Sorkheh, Semnan
- **Previous Positions:** Member of parliament, secretary and supreme leader’s personal representative to the Supreme National Security Council, head of the Center for Strategic Research – the think tank of Iran’s Expediency and Discernment Council<sup>12</sup> – and held several senior defense positions during the Iran-Iraq War.
- **Noteworthy Facts:** Rouhani was a member of the “Special Affairs Committee” that planned the political assassination of dissidents abroad.<sup>13</sup> He also supported the crackdown on student protests in 1999<sup>14</sup> and

8. A prominent Iranian military commander recently reiterated this line of thinking. See: “نتیجه انتخابات « ثانویه است، بحث اولیه «حضور» است” (The ‘Outcome of the Elections’ Are Secondary, The Primary Issue is ‘Turnout’),” *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), May 2, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/12/1396010/نتیجه-انتخابات-ثانویه-است-بحث-اولیه-حضور-است>)

9. See comments by Behnam Ben Taleblu in: “بن‌طالبلو: تراژدی این است که ایرانی‌ها همیشه باید بین بد و بدتر انتخاب کنند” (Ben Taleblu: [The Fact That] Iranians Have Always Had to Choose Between Bad and Worse is a Tragedy),” *Voice of America Persian*, April 10, 2017. (<http://ir.voanews.com/a/us-horizon-/3813393.html>)

10. “9- The Executive Power: 9.1- The Presidency,” *Iran Online*, accessed May 3, 2017. (<http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution-9-1.html>)

11. See stem chart in: U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence, “Iranian Naval Forces: A Tale of Two Navies,” February 2017, page 14. (<http://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/Intel%20agencies/iran/Iran%20022217SP.pdf?ver=2017-02-28-082634-643>)

12. “(زندگی‌نامه: حسن روحانی (۱۳۲۷-))” (Biography: Hassan Rouhani (1327-)),” *Hamshahri Online*, July 12, 2009. (<http://hamshahronline.ir/details/85337>)

13. “No Safe Haven: Iran’s Global Assassination Campaign,” *Iran Human Rights Documentation Center*, accessed May 8, 2017. (<http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/english/publications/reports/3152-no-safe-haven-iran-s-global-assassination-campaign.html>)

14. See Rouhani quote in: Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why it Failed and How it Might Succeed*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), page 197.

campaigning for president in 2013 on turning “threats into opportunities”<sup>15</sup> while promising to “keep the wheel of the economy and centrifuges spinning.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Dropout: Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf (age 55)**

- **Current Position:** Mayor of Tehran
- **Background:** IRGC (veteran from the Iran-Iraq War)<sup>17</sup>
- **Hometown:** Torqabeh, Razavi Khorasan
- **Previous Positions:** IRGC Air Force commander, briefly led Khatam al-Anbiya construction headquarters,<sup>18</sup> and national police chief.
- **Noteworthy Facts:** Qalibaf ran and lost in the presidential elections in 2005 and 2013 (but came in second place). In 1999, Qalibaf was one of several IRGC commanders that signed an open letter to President Mohammad Khatami warning him of the Guard’s intervention if protesters were not crushed.<sup>19</sup> While Qalibaf has cultivated a reputation as a competent manager as Tehran mayor,<sup>20</sup> he has recently faced several scandals such as the “astronomical land deals,” involving the sale of land at discounted rates to officials including those close to Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani.<sup>21</sup>
- **Endorsement:** Qalibaf withdrew from the race on May 15 and endorsed Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi.<sup>22</sup>

### **Challenger: Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi (age 56)**

- **Current Position:** Trustee of Iran’s wealthiest endowment, the Reza Holy Precinct, which oversees the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad<sup>23</sup>
- **Background:** Cleric
- **Hometown:** Mashhad, Razavi Khorasan
- **Previous Positions:** Attorney general, prosecutor general of the Special Clerical Court, head of the Inspectorate Organization, and prosecutor in Karaj, Hamedan, and Tehran.<sup>24</sup>

15. روحانی: می‌خواهم تهدید را تبدیل به فرصت کنم.” (Rouhani: I Want to Turn Threats Into Opportunities), *ISNA* (Iran), May 28, 2013. (<http://www.isna.ir/news/92030703816/روحانی-می-خواهم-تهدید-را-تبدیل-به-فرصت-کنم>)

16. Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ali Alfoneh, “The Man and the Myth,” *The Weekly Standard*, July 14, 2014. (<http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-man-and-the-myth/article/796083>)

17. زندگی-نامۀ محمدباقر قالیباف (Biography of Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf), *Tebyan* (Iran), June 1, 2013. (<http://article.tebyan.net/247685/زندگی-نامۀ-محمدباقر-قالیباف>)

18. (Biography), *Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf*, accessed May 10, 2017. (<http://ghalibaf.ir/page/biography>)

19. Translation of the July 1999 letter available at: “IRGC Commanders’ Letter to Khatami,” *Iran Data Portal*, accessed May 11, 2017. (<http://irandataportal.syr.edu/irgc-commanders-letter-to-khatami>)

20. “Iran election: why Tehran mayor’s popularity may harm his chances,” *The Guardian* (UK), May 29, 2013. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/may/29/iran-election-tehran-mayor-bagher-ghalibaf>)

21. (فروش-املاک-شهرداری-به-مدیران-شهری-متری-۲-میلیون (Sale of municipality property to city managers at 2-million [tomans] per meter), *Shargh* (Iran), August 27, 2016. (<http://www.sharghdaily.ir/News/101399/فروش-املاک-شهرداری-به-مدیران-شهری-متری-۲-میلیون>); “Parliament Lets Tehran’s Mayor off the Hook in Corruption Scandal,” *Iran Wire*, March 15, 2017. (<https://iranwire.com/en/features/4499>)

22. اتحاد نیروهای انقلاب-علیه-دولت-ناکارآمد-و-اشرافی-قالیباف-به-نفع-رئیس-کناره‌گیری-کرد + متن بیانیه قالیباف (Unity of the Revolutionary Forces Against the Ineffective and Aristocratic Government/Qalibaf Will Step Aside in Favor of Raisi + Text of Qalibaf’s Statement), *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), May 15, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/25/1408556/اتحاد-نیروهای-انقلاب-علیه-دولت-ناکارآمد-و-اشرافی-قالیباف-به-نفع-رئیس-کناره-گیری-کرد-متن-بیانیه-قالیباف>)

23. شرح زندگی (Biography), *Ebrahim Raisi*, accessed May 8, 2017. (<http://raisi.ir/page/biography>)

24. Ibid.

- **Noteworthy Facts:** Raisi was a member of the “death committee” that executed up to 5,000 political opposition members in 1988;<sup>25</sup> he is also widely rumored to be a frontrunner to succeed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Dropout: Eshaq Jahangiri (age 60)**

- **Current Position:** First vice president
- **Background:** Civilian politician
- **Hometown:** Sirjan, Kerman<sup>27</sup>
- **Previous Positions:** Member of parliament, governor of Isfahan, and minister of mines in the Khatami administration.<sup>28</sup>
- **Noteworthy Facts:** Jahangiri has claimed to act as a liaison for the reformist camp to Supreme Leader Khamenei.<sup>29</sup>
- **Endorsement:** He ran as a proxy candidate for Rouhani and is withdrawing from the race.

#### **Challenger: Seyyed Mostafa Aqa Mir-Salim (age 69)**

- **Current Position:** Chairman of the Executive Board of Irankhodro Powertrain Company (IPCO)<sup>30</sup>
- **Background:** Civilian politician
- **Hometown:** Tehran
- **Previous Positions:** Former police chief and advisor to then-President Khamenei, member and one-time secretary of the Supreme Council on the Cultural Revolution,<sup>31</sup> and minister of culture during former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s the second term.<sup>32</sup>
- **Noteworthy Facts:** During his tenure as minister of culture, Mir-Salim was known for his strict enforcement of social and cultural laws.

#### **Challenger: Seyyed Mostafa Hasehmi-Taba (age 71)**

- **Current Position:** Adviser to the minister of sports and youth<sup>33</sup>
- **Background:** Civilian politician

25. “Deadly Fatwa: Iran’s 1988 Prison Massacre,” *Iran Human Rights Documentation Center*, accessed May 8, 2017. (<http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/3158-deadly-fatwa-iran-s-1988-prison-massacre.html>)

26. Ray Takeyh, “Iran’s likely next supreme leader is no friend of the West,” *The Washington Post*, September 26, 2016. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/irans-likely-next-supreme-leader-is-no-friend-of-the-west/2016/09/26/eb3becc0-79fb-11e6-bd86-b7bbd53d2b5d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.b9ea8060e8e7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/irans-likely-next-supreme-leader-is-no-friend-of-the-west/2016/09/26/eb3becc0-79fb-11e6-bd86-b7bbd53d2b5d_story.html?utm_term=.b9ea8060e8e7))

27. “مشخصات شناسنامه‌ای 6 کاندیدای ریاست جمهوری در جدول زیر آمده است” (Details of the Identity Cards of the 6 Presidential Candidates), *Tabnak* (Iran), April 21, 2017. (<http://tabnak.ir/fa/news/686838/مشخصات-شناسنامه‌ای-6-کاندیدای-ریاست-جمهوری>)

28. “زندگینامه اسحاق جهانگیری” (The Biography of Eshaq Jahangiri), *Young Journalists Club* (Iran), April 19, 2017. (<http://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/6050836/زندگینامه-اسحاق-جهانگیری>)

29. “I am the channel of reformists with the leadership,” *Etemad* (Iran), March 5, 2017. ([http://www.etemadnewspaper.ir/Modules/News/PrintVer.aspx?News\\_Id=69871&V\\_News\\_Id=&Src=Main](http://www.etemadnewspaper.ir/Modules/News/PrintVer.aspx?News_Id=69871&V_News_Id=&Src=Main))

30. “Mostafa Mir-Salim: The Only Partisan Candidate in the Presidential Elections,” *BBC Persian* (UK), April 25, 2017. (<http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-39686148>)

31. “زندگی-نامه (Biography),” *Mostafa Mir-Salim*, accessed May 10, 2017. (<http://mirsalim.com/زندگی-نامه>)

32. “Mostafa Mir-Salim; Dream of the Presidency,” *Asr-e Iran* (Iran), December 17, 2016. (<http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/511744/مصطفی-میرسلیم-روای-ریاست-جمهوری>)

33. “Know Mostafa Hashemi-Taba Better,” *Young Journalists Club* (Iran), April 17, 2017. (<http://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/6046140/مصطفی-هاشمی-طبا-را-بیشتر-شناسید>)

- **Hometown:** Isfahan
- **Previous Positions:** Minister of industry under the prime ministership of Mohammad-Javad Bahonar, minister of physical education in the Rafsanjani government, head of the Islamic Republic of Iran's National Olympic Committee.<sup>34</sup>
- **Noteworthy Facts:** Hashemi-Taba ran and lost in the 2001 presidential elections (he came in last place).<sup>35</sup>
- **Endorsement:** On May 13, Hashemi-Taba endorsed Rouhani.<sup>36</sup>

## FIVE TRENDS IMPACTING IRAN'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

While the Islamic Republic's unpredictable "elections" have long confounded<sup>37</sup> Iran watchers and Iranian citizens alike, there are at least five key trends that have developed. Some of these trends are almost as old as the Islamic Republic itself, while others are rooted in changes that occurred when Ali Khamenei became supreme leader in 1989.

### TREND NUMBER ONE: SECOND TERM INCUMBENCY

Since 1981, every Iranian incumbent president has served two terms. The only two presidents who served less were Abol-Hossein Bani-Sadr, Iran's first president, and his replacement, Mohammad-Ali Rajaie.<sup>38</sup> Bani-Sadr fled in 1981 after falling out with former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, and was impeached by the post-revolutionary parliament.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, Rajaie was killed in August 1981 in a bombing less than a month after he was elected.<sup>40</sup> Since then, all Iranian presidents have served two four-year terms, without exception.

Name of President	Number of Terms Served
Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr	1
Mohammad-Ali Rajaie	1
Seyyed Ali Khamenei	2
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	2
Seyyed Mohammad Khatami	2
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	2
Hassan Rouhani	1 (so far)

34. Biography of Seyyed Mostafa Hashemi-Taba," *Safirane* (Iran), April 22, 2017. (<http://safirane57.ir/?p=7561>)

35. (Details of the Identity Cards of the 6 Presidential Candidates)," *Tabnak* (Iran), April 21, 2017. (<http://tabnak.ir/fa/news/686838/مشخصات-شناسنامه‌ای-6-کاندیدای-ریاست-جمهوری>)

36. @PressTV, "Candidate #Hashemitaba officially withdraws from presidential race, says he would support @HassanRouhani," *Twitter*, May 13, 2017. (<https://twitter.com/PressTV/status/863387957956407298>); "بیانیه تحلیلی هاشمی طبا درباره دوازدهمین دوره انتخابات ریاست جمهوری (Analytical Statement of Hashemi-Taba About the Twelfth Presidential Election)," *ISNA* (Iran), May 15, 2017. (<http://www.isna.ir/news/96022515951/بیانیه-تحلیلی-هاشمی-طبا-درباره-دوازدهمین-دوره-انتخابات-ریاست>)

37. See, for instance: Amir Taheri and The International Herald Tribune, "Give Khatami Time to Prove Himself in Tehran," *The New York Times*, May 28, 1997. (<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/28/opinion/give-khatami-time-to-prove-himself-in-tehran.html>)

38. (Iran's Presidents)," *Aftabir* (Iran), April 10, 2007. ([http://www.aftabir.com/articles/view/politics/iran/c1176202793\\_president\\_p1.php/رئیس-جمهورهای-ایران](http://www.aftabir.com/articles/view/politics/iran/c1176202793_president_p1.php/رئیس-جمهورهای-ایران))

39. Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pages 16-17.

40. Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), page 214.

## TREND NUMBER TWO: CLERICAL DOMINATION

Upon his ascension in 1981, Khamenei codified the clerical domination of the Iranian presidency.<sup>41</sup> Four out of seven presidents from 1980 until the present have been clerics, and from 1981 until now only one president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), has come from a non-clerical background. And while he identified as a leftist, Iran’s first president came from a prominent religious family and his father was a cleric.<sup>42</sup>

Name of President	Background
Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr	Civilian (son of a cleric)
Mohammad-Ali Rajaie	Civilian
Seyyed Ali Khamenei	Cleric
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	Cleric
Seyyed Mohammad Khatami	Cleric
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	Civilian (IRGC) <sup>43</sup>
Hassan Rouhani	Cleric

## TREND NUMBER THREE: CHEATING AND VOTER FRAUD

Electoral irregularities are common in Iran’s presidential elections. Tehran not only grossly violates international electoral norms, but also its own laws and procedures. For instance, according to a report on the country’s electoral institutions, “the Guardian Council must certify the election results before the Leader endorses it.”<sup>44</sup> This did not happen in 2009. Thus, while 2009 is famously remembered for suspicious vote counting,<sup>45</sup> premature campaign station closures,<sup>46</sup> and the brutal repression of peaceful opposition protestors,<sup>47</sup> it remains but one of many instances of cheating in the Islamic Republic’s elections.

41. The Islamic Republic has somewhat struggled with the concept of the clergy in elected office. For more, see: “چرا نظر امام درباره حضور روحانیت؟ در امور اجرایی تغییر کرد؟ (Why Did the Imam’s Opinion Change about the Presence of the Clergy in Administrative Affairs),” *Jahan News* (Iran), March 2, 2014. (<http://www.jahannews.com/analysis/347310/چرا-نظر-امام-درباره-حضور-روحانیت-امور-اجرایی-تغییر-کرد>); Also see the collected sermons and statements of Ayatollah Khomeini: “جلد ۱۰ - صفحه ۱۵ (Volume 10 – Page 15),” *Ruhollah Khomeini* (Iran), accessed May 5, 2017. (<http://farsi.rouhollah.ir/library/sahifeh?volume=10&page=15>)

42. See description contained in asterisk: Barry Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions: The American Experience in Iran*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), page 308. (<http://www.rubincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Paved-with-Good-Intentions-final.pdf>)

43. Danielle Pletka and Ali Alfoneh, “Iran’s Hidden Revolution,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2009. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/opinion/17pletka.html>); “Profile: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,” *BBC News* (UK), August 4, 2010. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-10866448>)

44. Yasmin Alem, “Duality by Design: The Iranian Electoral System,” *International Foundation for Electoral Systems*, March 2011, page 53. ([https://www.sssup.it/UploadDocs/14620\\_2\\_R\\_Duality\\_by\\_Design\\_The\\_Iranian\\_Electoral\\_System\\_Yasmin\\_Alem.pdf](https://www.sssup.it/UploadDocs/14620_2_R_Duality_by_Design_The_Iranian_Electoral_System_Yasmin_Alem.pdf))

45. Simon Robinson, “Five Reasons to Suspect Iran’s Election Results: Are Any of the Vote Totals Suspicious?” *Time*, June 15, 2009. ([http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1904645\\_1904644\\_1904639,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1904645_1904644_1904639,00.html))

46. Simon Robinson, “Five Reasons to Suspect Iran’s Election Results: Did the Voting Go Smoothly?” *Time*, June 15, 2009. ([http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1904645\\_1904644\\_1904641,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1904645_1904644_1904641,00.html))

47. Ian Black and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Iran uprising turns bloody,” *The Guardian* (UK), June 16, 2009. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/15/iran-elections-protests-mousavi-attacks>)

According to senior parliamentarian Ali Motahari, Rafsanjani once claimed that the 2005 election was engineered, and that 110 military commanders were condemned in court over their interference, but authorities ultimately dropped the case.<sup>48</sup> In the second round of that election, “massive irregularities” were reported in favor of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,<sup>49</sup> then relatively unknown but favored by the security establishment.

Iran’s electoral process is so famously corrupt that Rafsanjani, not a stickler about legal procedures, had once openly referred to the prospect of serious cheating in the 1997 election.<sup>50</sup> In that same election, reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami framed his candidacy to the supreme leader as a way to diminish the perception that Iran’s elections were foreordained.<sup>51</sup>

While interference by hardline authorities in the Islamic Republic’s “elections” will remain a reality, the government will want to prevent a repeat of 2009 where *overt* cheating triggered convulsive protests that, according to the supreme leader and the head of the Revolutionary Guard, nearly collapsed the regime.

#### TREND NUMBER FOUR: SECOND TERM FALLING OUT

Ever since Khamenei became supreme leader in 1989, every Iranian president has fell out of favor with the supreme leader during his second term. This is likely a product of two interconnected factors. The first is a desire by more ambitious presidents, like Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani, to obtain and maintain an independent political following. The second is the supreme leader’s own anxiety about the erosion of his power.<sup>52</sup> Should the incumbent genuinely win, the supreme leader has the option of artificially deflating the results to weaken the president.<sup>53</sup> He also has the option of escalating attacks on the incumbent in the run-up to the election or offering presidential challengers a wide berth to criticize the current administration. The supreme leader’s recent attacks on the Rouhani administration’s economic track record<sup>54</sup> and educational policies<sup>55</sup> appear calibrated for such purposes.

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48. “ماجرای محکومیت 110 نفر از فرماندهان نظامی بخاطر دخالت در انتخابات 84” (The Story of The Condemning of 110 Military Commanders for Meddling in the 2005 Election), *Aftab News* (Iran), January 31, 2017. (<http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/423857/> - ماجرای محکومیت 110 نفر از فرماندهان نظامی بخاطر دخالت در انتخابات 84 - ناپدید شدن پرونده احمدی نژاد در قوه قضائیه - وضعیت کروی - و موسوی - و آشنایی آیت الله هاشمی - با شهید مطهری)

49. See: “Victory for a religious hardliner in Iran,” *The Economist* (UK), June 27, 2005. (<http://www.economist.com/node/4123204>)

50. Mentioned in: Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why it Failed and How it Might Succeed*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), page 149.

51. Noted in: “Iran and the West: The Pariah State Episode 2/3,” *BBC News* (UK), July 4, 2009. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00ht3p7>) accessed via: Bobby, “Part 2 - BBC Iran and the West 2/3 The Man who Changed the World - ایران و غرب -” *You Tube*, January 29, 2012. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91xuueQ7Rml>)

52. Other scholars have framed Khamenei’s tiffs with Iran’s presidents as part of a “desire to further consolidate power around the supreme leader” and not necessarily the potent challenges personalities like Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani posed. Saeid Golkar, “Why Khamenei Always Fights His Presidents,” *The National Interest*, May 19, 2016. (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-khamenei-always-fights-his-presidents-16272?page=show>)

53. This was assumed to have happened in 1993, when Rafsanjani won 63 percent of the vote, dropping drastically from 94 percent in 1989. Compare: “1989 Presidential Election,” *Iran Data Portal*, accessed May 8, 2017. (<http://irandatportal.syr.edu/1989-presidential-election>) with: “1993 Presidential Election,” *Iran Data Portal*, accessed May 8, 2017. (<http://irandatportal.syr.edu/1993-presidential-election>)

54. Ladane Nasser, “Khamenei Deepens Economy Divide With Rouhani as Election Nears,” *Bloomberg*, April 25, 2017. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-04-25/khamenei-deepens-economy-divide-with-rouhani-as-election-nears>); Arash Karami, “Ahead of presidential vote, Khamenei attacks Rouhani’s economy,” *Al Monitor*, March 23, 2017. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/iran-khamenei-nowruz-speech-rouhani-economy-elections.html>)

55. “Iranian supreme leader critical of ‘Western-influenced’ Rouhani education plan,” *Reuters*, May 8, 2017. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-khamenei-idUSKBN1830H4>)

## TREND NUMBER FIVE: A LAST WEEK SURGE

While the final week of campaigning matters for all presidential elections worldwide, they are a particularly important time in the Islamic Republic. Over the past two decades in Iran, the final week of campaigning has seen the consolidation of support around candidates, particularly for those whose success was previously unexpected. Mohammad Khatami in 1997<sup>56</sup> and Hassan Rouhani in 2013<sup>57</sup> were all (to varying degrees) considered “dark-horse” candidates that benefitted from a “surge” of support in the final week.

Nowhere was the surge phenomenon more evident than in 2009. Buoyed by a strong televised debate performance, the reformist Mir-Hossein Mousavi generated considerable enthusiasm in the final week. That momentum and its translation into a large turnout<sup>58</sup> created the expectation of an impending defeat for Ahmadinejad.<sup>59</sup> When authorities pronounced Ahmadinejad the winner by a large margin, this challenged popular perception<sup>60</sup> and led Iranians into the streets to protest.

## KEY POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

### IRAN'S PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Televised debates are one of the few tools that Iran's presidential contenders have to sharpen the contrast between each other. The debates enable candidates to appeal to both large demographics and elite factions – all within a tightly controlled political space. This year, the government flirted with the prospect of editing the popular televised debates. But public outcry appears to have convinced the regime to let the debates air live as scheduled.<sup>61</sup> However, even the prospect of unfiltered political dialogue among insiders poses concerns for the regime. Fearful of a repeat of 2009, officials are working to increase election security and prevent any post-election fallout.<sup>62</sup>

In this season's first debate, Eshaq Jahangiri, who serves as first vice president and is considered a proxy candidate for Rouhani, emerged as the clear winner. Jahangiri's aggressive defense against Qalibaf,<sup>63</sup> who became the principle

56. Stephen Kinzer, “Moderate Leader Is Elected In Iran By A Wide Margin,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1997. (<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/25/world/moderate-leader-is-elected-in-iran-by-a-wide-margin.html>)

57. “Hassan Rouhani wins Iran presidential election,” *BBC News* (UK), June 15, 2005. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22916174>)

58. Reportedly, there was an 85 percent turnout in that election. “2009 Presidential Election,” *Iran Data Portal*, accessed May 8, 2017. (<http://irandatportal.syr.edu/2009-presidential-election>)

59. Ian Black and Peter Walker, “Iranians flood to polls for pivotal election,” *The Guardian* (UK), June 12, 2009. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/12/iranian-election-president-ahmadinejad-mousavi>)

60. Laura Secor, “Laura Secor: The Iranian Vote,” *The New Yorker*, June 13, 2009. (<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/laura-secor-the-iranian-vote>)

61. As it did in 2009 and 2013. “Iran to air live presidential debates after U-turn,” *The National* (UAE), April 24, 2017. (<http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/iran-to-air-live-presidential-debates-after-u-turn>)

62. “فعالیت‌های لازم برای حفظ نظم و امنیت انتخابات انجام شده است” (Necessary Activities Have Been Undertaken to Preserve the System and the Security of the Election), *ISNA* (Iran), April 21, 2017. ([http://www.isna.ir/news/امنیت\\_انتخابات\\_خط\\_قرمز](http://www.isna.ir/news/امنیت_انتخابات_خط_قرمز)); “امنیت انتخابات خط قرمز (امنیت انتخابات انجام شده است)”; “فعالیت‌های لازم برای حفظ نظم و امنیت انتخابات انجام شده است” (Election Security is the Country's Redline), *Mehr News Agency* (Iran), April 11, 2017. (<http://www.mehrnews.com/news/3950145/امنیت-انتخابات-خط-قرمز-کشور-است>)

63. متن کامل سخنان ۶ کاندیدای ریاست جمهوری در اولین مناظره + عکس و فیلم (The Complete Transcript of the Statements of the 6 Candidates in the First Debate + Pictures and Film), *Tasnim New Agency* (Iran), April 28, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/08/1391866/-متن-کامل-سخنان-6-کاندیدای-ریاست-جمهوری-در-اولین-مناظره-عکس-و-فیلم>)



challenger to the Rouhani administration, was praised by the public<sup>64</sup> and on social media.<sup>65</sup> Conversely, Raisi, who many assumed would lead the charge against Rouhani, gave an underwhelming performance.

The second debate produced mixed reactions. While Qalibaf continued to outshine Raisi, all principlist challengers landed punches against the administration on the economy. For his part, Rouhani criticized the Revolutionary Guard for attempting to torpedo the 2015 nuclear deal by showcasing underground depots and inscribing missiles with (anti-Israel) “slogans.”<sup>66</sup> This drew a sharp response from the commander of Iran’s Armed Forces General Staff<sup>67</sup> and another military spokesperson,<sup>68</sup> both of whom are members of the IRGC. While some in the West point to this as proof that Rouhani is the “lesser of two evils,” he ultimately cannot overcome the IRGC and Khamenei on matters of foreign and security policy. Rouhani’s feud with the IRGC goes back to the Iran-Iraq War<sup>69</sup> and is less politically convulsive than can sometimes appear to outside observers.

Much like the first two debates, Qalibaf outperformed Raisi in the final contest. The pro-Rouhani camp successfully parried most attacks and highlighted the troubling records of personal corruption and repression of its main challengers – Raisi and Qalibaf.<sup>70</sup> The administration attempted to link the challengers’ programs to the disastrous Ahmadinejad era. Jahangiri also continued to serve as an attack dog, enabling the incumbent to offer policy recommendations while projecting a presidential appearance.

Although poll results are generally unreliable in authoritarian regimes and Iran lacks independent polling, metrics from the International Perspectives for Public Opinion from May 14 have shown Rouhani in first place with 28 percent, Qalibaf at 9 percent, Raisi at 12 percent, along with 22 percent refusing to answer and nearly 30 percent remaining undecided.<sup>71</sup> Out of decided voters, Rouhani has a 55-percent lead.<sup>72</sup>

## CAMPAIGNING IN IRAN

Trends such as cheating and pre-election intimidation have already emerged in the presidential campaign. Rouhani’s north Tehran campaign office was reportedly twice harassed by the police and plainclothes

64. Alireza Ramezani, “Why Iran’s conservatives are suddenly rooting for Rouhani’s VP,” *Al Monitor*, May 3, 2017. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/iran-first-vp-eshagh-jahangiri-debate-ghalibaf-rouhani.html>)

65. Iranian social media profiles hailed Jahangiri as “Super Eshaq” photoshopping his head onto an image of the comic book hero Superman. @fresh\_sadegh, “Super #Eshaq. #Jahangiri #IranElection2017 by @election96,” *Twitter*, April 29, 2017. ([https://twitter.com/fresh\\_sadegh/status/858325198864613377](https://twitter.com/fresh_sadegh/status/858325198864613377))

66. “دولت حرف حریفی برای گفتن نداشت” (The Government Had Nothing Real to Say), *Kayhan* (Iran), May 6, 2017. (<http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/103221>)

67. انتقاد تند سرلشکر باقری به سخنان اخیر رئیس‌جمهور در حوزه موشکی” (The Harsh Criticism of Commander Bagheri to the Recent Statements by the President About Missiles), *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), May 8, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/18/1400991/> - انتقاد تند سرلشکر - باقری به سخنان اخیر رئیس‌جمهور در حوزه موشکی)

68. “توان نظامی ربطی به برجام ندارد” (Military Power Has Nothing to Do With the JCPOA), *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), May 5, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/15/1398742/>)

69. Behnam Ben Taleblu, “The Long Shadow of the Iran-Iraq War,” *The National Interest*, October 23, 2014. (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-long-shadow-the-iran-iraq-war-11535?page=show>); Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ali Alfoneh, “The Man and the Myth,” *The Weekly Standard*, July 14, 2014. (<http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-man-and-the-myth/article/796083>)

70. IranianTVChannel, “سومین مناظره زنده تلویزیونی نامزدهای انتخابات ریاست جمهوری 96 - بخش اول” (Third Live Televised Debate of the Presidential Election Candidates in 96 + Part One), *YouTube*, May 12, 2017. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAn7yzPM43E>)

71. “Poll Results of May 14,” *International Perspectives for Public Opinion*, accessed May 15, 2017. (<http://ippogroup.com/poll/>)

72. Ibid.



The reformist-pragmatist coalition established by Rafsanjani has thus far held together and continues to back Rouhani.<sup>82</sup> Despite some dissatisfaction with his first term, the major reformist coalition and its leading figures like former President Khatami<sup>83</sup> and former Parliament Speaker Mehdi Karroubi have endorsed Rouhani.<sup>84</sup> Former Prime Minister and Green Movement leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi is expected to do the same.<sup>85</sup> The incumbent also enjoys the backing of Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, a traditional conservative and regime insider who has fallen out with certain hardline forces.<sup>86</sup> For his part, Rouhani is looking to sharpen the divide between him and his opponents by rhetorically challenging the establishment,<sup>87</sup> as he astutely did in 2013.

Until very recent, the conservative camp – known as the principlists – were divided over whom they should back, Raisi or Qalibaf, even as IRGC-affiliated figures and Khamenei allies have lined up behind Raisi.<sup>88</sup> However, on May 15, Qalibaf withdrew from the presidential contest<sup>89</sup> in favor of Raisi, who welcomed the move.<sup>90</sup> Qalibaf is slated to help Raisi campaign during this last week,<sup>91</sup> aiming to help unify Iran’s political right. The Popular Front of Islamic Revolution Forces – the major principlist coalition created by a former IRGC commander to consolidate support behind a single candidate – which initially supported both Raisi and Qalibaf,<sup>92</sup> also welcomed the move.<sup>93</sup> But the

82. “Hassan Rouhani Was Announced as the Definitive Candidate of the Reformists/Film,” *Aftabir* (Iran), March 15, 2017. (<http://www.aftabir.com/news/article/view/2017/03/13/1660597>)

83. “The Repeat of the Alliance with Rouhani,” *Shargh* (Iran), March 13, 2017. (<http://www.sharghdaily.ir/News/117380/تکرار-هم‌پیمانی-با-روحانی>)

84. “Mehdi Karroubi: I will Vote for Hassan Rouhani,” *Radio Farda*, May 15, 2017. (<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/fl2-mehdi-karroubi-votes-for-rouhani/28489033.html>)

85. Parisa Hafezi, “Iran reformists to back Rouhani re-election, though some voters grow cool,” *Reuters*, May 4, 2017. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-rouhani-rights-idUSKBN1802J3>)

86. “Larijani’s Huff,” *Etemad* (Iran), March 14, 2017. ([http://etemadnewspaper.ir/Modules/News/PrintVer.aspx?News\\_Id=70755&V\\_News\\_Id=&Src=Main](http://etemadnewspaper.ir/Modules/News/PrintVer.aspx?News_Id=70755&V_News_Id=&Src=Main))

87. Erin Cunningham, “Iran’s Rouhani lashes rivals with rare criticism of security forces, ruling clerics,” *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2017. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/irans-rouhani-lashes-rivals-with-rare-criticism-of-security-forces-ruling-clerics/2017/05/09/6ba34d5a-34bd-11e7-ab03-aa29f656f13e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.864f7f65bb27](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/irans-rouhani-lashes-rivals-with-rare-criticism-of-security-forces-ruling-clerics/2017/05/09/6ba34d5a-34bd-11e7-ab03-aa29f656f13e_story.html?utm_term=.864f7f65bb27))

88. “Panahian’s Firm Support of Ebrahim Raisi,” *Fararu* (Iran), May 1, 2017. (<http://fararu.com/fa/news/314247/فیلم/نظر‌حسن‌عباسی‌نسبت‌به‌ابراهیم‌رئیس>); and “حمایت‌قاطع‌پناهیان‌از‌ابراهیم‌رئیس (Film/Hassan Abbas’s Opinion about Ebrahim Raisi),” *Irannews* (Iran), April 19, 2017. (<http://www.irannews.ir/film/s/p/51843-1492616763-2364>)

89. “Unity of the Revolutionary Forces Against the Ineffective and Aristocratic Government/Qalibaf Will Step Aside in Favor of Raisi + Text of Qalibaf’s Statement,” *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), May 15, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/25/1408556/اتحاد‌نیروهای‌انقلاب‌علیه‌دولت‌ناکارآمد‌و‌اشرافی‌قالیباف-به‌نفع‌رئیس‌کناره‌گیری‌کرد+متن‌بیانیه‌قالیباف>)

90. “Raisi’s Response to Qalibaf Stepping-Aside: Qalibaf’s Action was Revolutionary,” *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), May 15, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/25/1409000/واکنش‌رئیس‌به‌کناره‌گیری‌قالیباف-اقدام‌قالیباف‌انقلابی‌بود>)

91. “Raisi and Qalibaf will be Present Tomorrow in a Large Gathering in the Tehran Musalla + Time,” *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), May 15, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/25/1409022/فردا-با-هم-در-اجتماع-بزرگ-مصلای-تهران-حضور-می-یابند-زمان>)

92. “The Popular Front is a Non-Partisan and Popular Movement to Answer the Country’s Real Question,” *Popular Front of Islamic Revolution Forces*, March 24, 2017. (<http://jebheyemardomi.com/news-id=1438>); “The Final Five Candidates of the ‘Popular Front’ Have Been Announced,” *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), April 6, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/01/17/1372013/5-کاندیدای‌نهایی‌جبهه‌مردمی-مشخص‌شدند>)

93. “Unity of the Revolutionary Forces Against the Ineffective and Aristocratic Government/Qalibaf Will Step Aside in Favor of Raisi + Text of Qalibaf’s Statement,” *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), May 15, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/02/25/1408556/اتحاد‌نیروهای‌انقلاب‌علیه‌دولت‌ناکارآمد‌و‌اشرافی‌قالیباف-به‌نفع‌رئیس‌کناره‌گیری‌کرد+متن‌بیانیه‌قالیباف>)

principlist camp still faces divisions. Since former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad<sup>94</sup> – whom the Guardian Council disqualified<sup>95</sup> – has decided not to endorse any candidate,<sup>96</sup> his urban and rural poor voter base remains up for grabs. Both Raisi and Qalibaf adopted populist platforms and rhetoric to court this constituency.

## SUPREME LEADER SUCCESSION

Given Khamenei's advancing age and the public discussion of Raisi as a potential next supreme leader, this election carries particular significance for the future of the Islamic Republic. The vetting process for a new supreme leader has already reportedly commenced.<sup>97</sup>

Raisi owes his power to Khamenei and has longstanding ties with the judiciary and security services.<sup>98</sup> Should he become Iran's next supreme leader, he is likely to keep Iran on a revolutionary course, both at home and abroad. Since his appointment as trustee of the Reza Holy Precinct, state-affiliated outlets have referred to him as "Ayatollah," indicating he is being groomed for higher office, which nominally requires senior clerical rank.<sup>99</sup> Since Raisi announced his candidacy, however, the media has returned to calling him a mid-ranking cleric.

If Raisi wins, his odds of succeeding Khamenei significantly increase. Unseating the incumbent president – which has never occurred through the ballot box in Iran – would boost his influence and public standing. Conversely, electoral rejection would be a major blow to Raisi's personal brand, significantly reducing his chances of becoming the next supreme leader.<sup>100</sup> It is, however, within the realm of possibility for regime elites to select Raisi even after a defeat, although that selection would risk public backlash since the potential future occupant of Iran's highest political office would have been rejected by the people. Prior to Qalibaf's endorsement, Raisi could have also withdrawn from the race. He would have reaped the dividends of an enhanced political profile without tarnishing it with defeat.

Nonetheless, the next president will likely witness an important milestone and attempt to influence the succession, which in part depends on his popularity and ties to key power centers, including the IRGC. These networks matter more than the formal succession process. The Assembly of Experts, an 88-member body of clerics that is tasked

94. Aresu Eqbali and Asa Fitch, "Former Iranian Leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Launches Presidential Bid," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2017. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/former-iran-president-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-registers-for-new-run-at-presidency-1491986152>)

95. "دلائل رد صلاحیت احمدی نژاد اعلام شد / این اقدام ربطی به توصیه رهبری به وی نداشت" (The Reason for Ahmadinejad's Disqualification Was Stated/ This Action Was Unrelated to the Supreme Leader's Recommendation to Him), *Rokna* (Iran), April 23, 2017. (<http://www.rokna.ir/-3/259229-بخش-پرونده-3/>)

96. Saraneh TV, "حضور مجدد احمدی نژاد در مقابل دوربین پس از هفته‌ها غیبت" (Ahmadinejad's Presence on Camera after Weeks of Absence)," *YouTube*, May 3, 2017. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbcPQ9MFaA>)

97. "دلائل رد صلاحیت احمدی نژاد اعلام شد- این اقدام ربطی به توصیه رهبری به وی نداشت" (Rafsanjani: The Assembly of Experts Secretly Proposed Two Individuals for the Next Leader)," *BBC Persian* (UK), June 18, 2016. ([http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2016/06/160618\\_112\\_iran\\_leader\\_hashemi\\_rafsanjani](http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2016/06/160618_112_iran_leader_hashemi_rafsanjani)); "چندبار از رهبری شنیدم که خبرگان باید چند رهبر در آستین داشته باشد" (I Heard Several Times from the Leadership that the Assembly Must Have Several Leaders in its Sleeves)," *Jam News* (Iran), December 17, 2015. (<http://www.jamnews.ir/detail/News/610301>)

98. For more on Raisi, see: "ابراهیم رئیسی و پرونده‌های 'فتنه': از انفجار ۸ شهریور تا اعدام‌های ۸۸" (Ebrahim Raisi and the 'Sedition' Files: From the Explosion on the 8th of Shahrivar to the Executions of 88)," *BBC Persian* (UK), April 22, 2017. (<http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-39610137>)

99. Previously stated in: Behnam Ben Taleblu and Amir Toumaj, "Hardline Iranian Cleric Announces Presidential Run," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 7, 2017. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/behnam-ben-taleblu-hardline-iranian-cleric-announces-presidential-run/>)

100. Noted in: Michael Lipin, "US Nearly Silent on Iran's Presidential Election as Policy Toughens," *VOA News*, April 21, 2017. (<http://www.voanews.com/a/us-iran-presidential-election/3821129.html>)

with selecting the next supreme leader, did little more than green-light the decisions made by the highest echelons of the Islamic Republic every time a leader has been tapped or dropped.<sup>101</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

U.S. concerns about Iran currently include, but are not limited to, nuclear non-proliferation, terrorism and regional destabilization, Persian Gulf security, ballistic missiles, and human rights. All of these are portfolios overseen by Supreme Leader Khamenei and the IRGC. Therefore, a change in the Iranian presidency will not impact the threat Iran poses to the United States and its allies in the region. Rather, the Iranian president will continue to play a *supporting* role in the country's foreign and security policies by bringing his own unique administrative and rhetorical talents to bear.

While some might point out that it was the more technocratic and competent government of Hassan Rouhani that negotiated the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal,<sup>102</sup> he was only able to do so because Khamenei had earlier authorized limited negotiations with Washington.<sup>103</sup> Throughout the talks, Iran's nuclear negotiating team was bound by redlines set by the supreme leader.<sup>104</sup> As part of his 2017 campaign, Rouhani has embraced the accord and its economic dividends,<sup>105</sup> but Qalibaf's criticism about the JCPOA being a regime-wide achievement remains true. "Even if there was any government other than the present government, they would have followed the same path since the whole system ... had decided to partake in these negotiations," said Qalibaf.<sup>106</sup>

Whatever the future of Iran's JCPOA adherence,<sup>107</sup> U.S. policy should keep in mind that the JCPOA is a flawed nuclear agreement already heavily tilted in Iran's favor, especially through the use of sunset clauses and an inspections regime that skirts the need for direct, on-site surveillance of military bases involved with the nuclear program, and the development of ballistic missiles capable of carrying atomic warheads.

101. Ayatollah Khomeini picked Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri as his successor in 1985, but removed him in March 1989, and then Rafsanjani pushed for Khamenei to become leader later that same year. See: Mehdi Khalaji, "The Future of Leadership in the Shiite Community," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2017, pages 79-88. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus152-Khalaji.pdf>)

102. For deal text, see: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Vienna, July 14, 2015. ([http://collections.internetmemory.org/haeu/content/20160313172652/http://eeas.europa.eu/top\\_stories/2015/150714\\_iran\\_nuclear\\_deal\\_en.htm](http://collections.internetmemory.org/haeu/content/20160313172652/http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2015/150714_iran_nuclear_deal_en.htm))

103. In this speech, Iran's supreme leader likened negotiations to the "heroic flexibility" a wrestler shows when dealing with an opponent. See, "نرمش قهرمانانه" از چه زمانی مطرح شد/ نمایندگان تیزتر از شمشیر و نرم‌تر از حریر" (At What Point in Time Was 'Heroic Flexibility' Raised/Representatives That Are Sharper Than A Sword and Softer Than Silk)," *Fars News Agency* (Iran), September 18, 2013. (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920627001123>)

104. Noted in: Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Misreading Khamenei's Nuclear Role," *War on the Rocks*, June 25, 2015. (<https://warontherocks.com/2015/06/misreading-khameneis-nuclear-role/>)

105. Patrick Clawson, "Iran's Presidential Election: The Economic Situation," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 3, 2017. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-presidential-election-the-economic-situation>)

106. Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, quoted in: "شاهد یک بحران اقتصادی هستیم/ از برجام پاسداری می‌کنم" (We Are Witnessing an Economic Crisis/We Will Guard the JCPOA)," *ISNA* (Iran), May 1, 2017. (<http://www.isna.ir/news/96021106676/>) "قالیباغ: «برجام پاسداری می‌کنم»" (Qalibaf: The JCPOA is the Result of Revolutionarism and The Blood of The Martyrs)," *ISNA* (Iran), February 10, 2017. (<http://www.isna.ir/news/95112215317/>) (قالیباغ: برجام نتیجه انقلابی-گری و خون-شهادت)

107. Admittedly, Qalibaf and Raisi have expressed tacit support for the JCPOA. Erin Cunningham, "Iran's presidential candidates vow to uphold nuclear deal in televised debate," *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2017. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/irans-presidential-candidates-vow-to-uphold-nuclear-deal-in-televised-debate/2017/05/05/01ccbc6e-3179-11e7-9534-00e4656c22aa\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/irans-presidential-candidates-vow-to-uphold-nuclear-deal-in-televised-debate/2017/05/05/01ccbc6e-3179-11e7-9534-00e4656c22aa_story.html)). For how Raisi has framed his support for the JCPOA as a criticism of Rouhani, see: "رئیس: رنسی: I Will Cash the JCPOA's Check)," *Tabnak* (Iran), May 6, 2017. (<http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/691453/>) (رئیس-چک-برجام-را-نقد-می‌کنم)

The United States, however, has a strong interest to closely monitor the election and not remain aloof from protests that may follow contested election results. Hardline outlets close to the IRGC have reported that the West seeks to create a “larger sedition” than that which existed after the 2009 presidential elections.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, the regime has gone to great lengths to frame any potential post-election protest as the result of Western interference. On May 10, Khamenei made plain that those who would “take actions against the security of the country” would receive a “hard slap.”<sup>109</sup> If Iranians pour into the streets and protest cheating, the U.S. can and should avoid the timid criticisms it made in 2009 and keep the spotlight on the Islamic Republic’s oppression. Doing so would remind Tehran that no matter what agreement is reached on nuclear or security issues, the U.S. will support the Iranian people and their quest for popular sovereignty.

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108. “تبدیل انتخابات به فتنه” (Turning the Elections Into Sedition),” *Basirat* (Iran), April 23, 2017. (<http://basirat.ir/fa/publication/print/319/3435>)

109. Seyyed Ali Khamenei, quoted in: “هشدار آیت‌الله خامنه‌ای در مورد خطر «آشوب و فتنه» در ایران” (Ayatollah Khamenei’s Warning About the Danger of ‘Chaos and Sedition’ in Iran),” *BBC Persian* (UK), May 10, 2017. (<http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-39870135>)