



**KHAMENEI'S
TEAM OF RIVALS:
IRANIAN DECISION-MAKING,
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Executive Summary

Iran's national security decision-making process is not remotely as opaque as it sometimes appears. The recent crisis in Iraq and the nuclear negotiations in Geneva have opened a fascinating window into the efforts of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to bring rival groups within his government together behind a single set of policies. He appears to have been remarkably successful in mediating tensions between President Hassan Rouhani and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps senior leaders. They have come together, at least for the moment, behind a coherent set of strategies for dealing with a number of thorny problems in Iraq, the nuclear negotiations, and even economic reforms. It remains to be seen if these accommodations will survive the current crisis, of course, but the success of Khamenei's efforts so far is impressive.

The relationship between Rouhani and Khamenei is central to almost all Western analyses of Iran's likely trajectory in foreign and security policy, and in the nuclear negotiations. Much of the hopefulness about the negotiations themselves has stemmed from the assessment that Rouhani is a determined reformer willing to buck the pressures of the "hard-liners," by which is usually meant the IRGC and the clergy. Rouhani statements suggesting a desire to open Iran to the world appear to contradict the desires of the Supreme Leader, setting up speculation that Rouhani may even be able to press Khamenei further than he would like to go.

But the crisis of the last two months tells another tale. IRGC and clerical criticism of Rouhani died away as Mosul fell to the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). Khamenei seems to have worked hard to build a new relationship between the president and the IRGC, moreover. One of his oldest and most trusted friends in the military, Armed Forces Chief of the General Staff Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, publicly shut down criticism of Rouhani in IRGC-affiliated media in May and June. Two meetings of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) brought the president and the generals together in July and had them singing from the same hymn sheet on Iraq, the nuclear negotiations, and even Rouhani's economic proposals by the end of the month. Rouhani hosted the commanders for an *iftar* dinner on July 16, an unusual event followed by mutual public statements of support.

Khamenei's actions do not suggest that he fears Rouhani or feels pressured by him. Rouhani's interactions with the Supreme Leader and with the IRGC do not show a factionalized government riven by power-struggles. On the contrary, the events of the past two months show the Supreme Leader strongly supporting Rouhani, the president, in turn, enthusiastically backing the Supreme Leader's statements, rhetoric, and policies, and the IRGC supporting both leaders.

American strategies that rely on severe tensions within Iran's senior leadership or that imagine that Rouhani is somehow seriously at odds with the Supreme Leader and the IRGC on foreign, defense, or nuclear policy are likely to fail. We must reckon, at least for now, with an Iran firmly under the control of the Supreme Leader whose commanders and president are pulling in the same direction—a direction inimical to U.S. interests in the region and the world.

Introduction

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is trying to weld his government and security services into a functional team to implement a coherent set of economic, political, and military strategies. He has brought the leadership of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) together with President Hassan Rouhani and his own advisers behind a strategy of supporting continued nuclear talks, economic reform, an advise-and-assist effort in Iraq, keeping the U.S. out of Iraq, preventing the establishment of an independent Kurdistan, and supporting Nuri al Maliki's candidacy for a third term as Iraqi prime minister as long as that seems feasible. The crisis in Iraq and the nuclear talks offer a rare window into Iranian national security decision-making and have shown the degree to which Khamenei is very much in control, and Rouhani is very much a part of the team. There is no significant dissent within the Iranian senior leadership on these issues, and so we can expect to face these policies from Tehran for the foreseeable future.

A Confluence of Crises

Iran faced at least four significant crises in June 2014. The first was the dramatic expansion of territory and resources under the control of the al Qaeda splinter group in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). ISIS attacked the Iraqi city of Samarra, home of the Imam al Askari Shrine, one of the holiest Shi'a sites, on June 5. ISIS is the organizational descendant of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the group formed by Abu Musaab al Zarqawi in 2004 that ruthlessly attacked U.S. forces in Iraq but also attacked Shi'a civilians, fanning the flames of sectarian conflict in Iraq. AQI destroyed the Imam al Askari Shrine in Samarra in February 2006, igniting sectarian civil war in Iraq. The shrine was rebuilt in the succeeding years with the help of significant Iranian contributions. It remains a neuralgic spot for Iraqi Shi'a and Iran's leadership.

Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) repulsed the June 5, 2014 attack and tried to prepare for further ISIS assaults around Mosul and in Diyala Province. When the next attack came on June 10, however, the ISF collapsed, Mosul fell, and ISIS rapidly pushed south and southeast. ISIS attacked in Samarra again on June 11, penetrating the outer security perimeter of the Shrine, and also drove toward the Iranian border in Diyala.¹ Iran's leadership feared for the safety of the shrine, the survival of the Shi'a-led Iraqi government, and its own territorial integrity.

The ISIS advance came in the midst of a second crisis in Iraq that resulted from the inconclusive results of Iraq's recent parliamentary elections.² Maliki's State of Law Party had won a plurality of seats in the new parliament but was far short of the majority needed to seat him for a third term as prime minister. Sunni Arab opposition to him was implacable, and Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) leader Massoud Barzani was also opposed. Maliki was assembling the votes needed to retain power anyway. Shi'a parties other than Maliki's State of Law were assembling alternative coalitions to place someone other than Maliki in the premiership.³ It was not at all clear that the government would include meaningful Sunni participation—which would likely have fueled the Sunni insurgency of which ISIS was a leading but not sole part.

The third crisis was the arrival of the end-game of the negotiations about Iran's nuclear program and the international sanctions regime. The next round of talks was scheduled for June 16 and the expiration of the interim agreement loomed on July 20. Iranian negotiators held a preliminary meeting with their Western counterparts on June 9.⁴ It was imperative that some progress be made in this round in order to sustain support in Iran and the West for continuing to try for an agreement or, more likely, an extension of the interim agreement (as actually happened), in July.

The fourth crisis was the prospect of a unilateral declaration of independence by Iraqi Kurdistan. The collapse of the ISF created a vacuum in northern Iraq that Kurdish leader Barzani was quick to fill. Kurdish troops moved into the disputed city of Kirkuk on June 11 and immediately declared that Kirkuk was part of the KRG.⁵ But Barzani went even further, announcing on July 1 his intention to hold a referendum that would approve Kurdish independence.⁶ This move sparked a furor in Iran because of the fear that an independent Kurdistan would have designs on—and be an inspiration for—Kurdish separatists within Iran itself. The Iranians have therefore worked energetically both to deter Barzani from making such a declaration and to mitigate the consequences if he does.

These four crises erupted against the backdrop of the ongoing Syrian civil war. The Iranians rhetorically greeted the re-election of Bashar al Assad as Syria's president on June 3 as a turning point that would decide the war in their favor, but their leaders knew better. Assad remained unable—even with much assistance from Iranian forces and Lebanese Hezbollah—to control Damascus fully, let alone retake Aleppo. The election would not matter at all to the fight on the ground.⁷

Yet another crisis—or, perhaps better, opportunity—emerged in mid-June when Hamas kidnapped and killed three Israeli teenagers. Escalation rapidly ensued, as Hamas attacked Israel with rockets and the Israeli Air Force began to attack Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip. Israel announced the start of Operation Protective Edge, on July 7, and sent ground forces into Gaza ten days later.⁸

These foreign problems coincided with significant domestic challenges. Iran's economy continues to struggle despite the easing of some sanctions. Khamenei and his inner circle learned from their experiences with the 2009 election that protests of any sort can become mortal threats to the regime. They are therefore eager to preempt discontent before it can turn into unrest, and thus feel pressure to make economic progress quickly. The Supreme Leader is also determined to reduce Iran's dependence on the global economy and thereby immunize Iran against sanctions. He announced his new economic policy on March 11, 2014 under the rubric "resistance economy," and Rouhani has been working to implement this concept, which he helped develop.⁹

Rouhani brings a broadly technocratic approach to his job, sharply contrasting with his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He favors economic normalization and relaxation of strict socio-cultural controls. He has advocated opening the Iranian internet, in particular, and dismantling most or all of the filtering systems put in place over the years both to identify and snuff out dissent and to keep

Western immorality from eroding the revolutionary Islamic values the regime holds dear. These efforts have aroused the ire of cultural conservatives and entrenched economic interests and led to attacks against Rouhani from some corners of the regime. Khamenei faces the tricky problem of navigating these domestic shoals while confronting major national security crises.

Any state would be challenged to handle this many simultaneous and inter-linked crises at once, and nothing in Iran's recent history suggested that the Islamic Republic's leadership was up to the task. Before the collapse of Mosul, Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC Qods Force, was responsible for Iranian strategy in Iraq, Syria, and the Levant, while his deputy, Brigadier General Esmail Ghani, oversaw Qods Force efforts in Afghanistan. The nuclear negotiations were in the hands of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who is close to President Rouhani (a former lead negotiator himself), but the Supreme Leader was very much involved in even the technical details. Soleimani had historically also been a key figure in managing Iraqi politics, along with Iraqi Ambassador (and Qods Force officer) Hassan Danaeifar.

But Soleimani is badly overstretched overseeing the war in Syria, relationships with Lebanese Hezbollah, and the new major front in Iraq. His deputy, Ghani, must remain focused on Afghanistan, where the situation is as difficult and confusing for the Iranians as for the rest of the world. The direct personal involvement of Foreign Minister Zarif in the nuclear negotiations limited his bandwidth for taking on new challenges. The regular commanders of the IRGC and the Iranian conventional forces (Artesh), Mohammad Ali Ja'afari and Ataollah Salehi, have never played major roles in military, political, or diplomatic crises abroad. And the various advisers to the Supreme Leader and parliamentary proxies were heavily engaged on economic and nuclear-negotiations-related issues. There did not appear to be any spare capacity in the system for dealing with additional crises and complexity.

The eruption of the Kurdish independence crisis was particularly awkward for Iran. Jalal Talabani, former president of Iraq, had been Tehran's preferred Kurdish partner before he had an incapacitating stroke in December 2012. Talabani had served as a key interlocutor for Iran and mediator among Iraqi leaders. His rival, Massoud Barzani, was much more hostile to Tehran and a polarizing rather than unifying figure among Iraqi politicians. Barzani has also been far more vocally supportive of Kurdish independence than Talabani, and has been pushing that agenda aggressively since Talabani left the scene. The Iranians had to scramble to put together a team to handle all of these crises coming to a head at once. Remarkably, they did.

Team of Rivals?

Western analysts have consistently over-stated the tensions between Rouhani and the "hard-liners," some even suggesting that Rouhani was on thin ice with Khamenei himself.¹⁰ Rouhani, on the contrary, has been a trusted adviser to the Supreme Leader for many years, serving as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council for 16 years (1989-2005) and as lead nuclear negotiator from

2003 to 2005. He has never been an outsider, nor has he been a critic of the regime. He has instead consistently advocated a reform program designed to liberalize Iran's economic and cultural policies in order to strengthen the current regime's hold on power. These policies, rather than any real suspicion of his dedication to the ideals of the Islamic Republic, ran him afoul of religious zealots and entrenched economic interests on the other.

Those groups have been openly criticizing Rouhani since his election, to be sure, and they seized on the nuclear negotiations as evidence that Rouhani was trying to sell the Islamic Republic out to the Americans. Attacks on Rouhani were running steady in early June 2014, predictably in advance of the next round of Geneva talks. Radical cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi launched an assault against Rouhani's administration on June 4.¹¹ A group of 42 members of the Iranian parliament released a letter four days later accusing Rouhani of "threatening" and "weakening" Iran's national security because of his policies on the nuclear program, relations with the U.S., and his cultural policies.¹²

IRGC leaders have tended to damn with faint praise rather than attack Rouhani outright. Former IRGC Commander and current Senior Military Advisor to the Supreme Leader Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi said on June 6 that "the people will be more hopeful in the new administration" if Rouhani executes Khamenei's economic and cultural policies.¹³ IRGC Deputy Commander Brigadier General Hossein Salami said three days later that the IRGC supports the Rouhani government "because this is the administration of the Islamic Republic of Iran"¹⁴—hardly ringing endorsements, but also hardly attacks.

One of Khamenei's closest confidants in the military leadership also undertook a very public effort to stop media outlets affiliated with the military from attacking Rouhani. Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff Major General Hassan Firouzabadi began this effort with a public endorsement of Rouhani in May 2014.¹⁵ Firouzabadi is a fascinating figure in the Iranian scene. He is a medical doctor by training who suddenly became Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff in 1989 and an instant three-star general in 1995.¹⁶ He is not a member of the IRGC, nor does he have military experience. He does, however, have the complete confidence of the Supreme Leader, with whom he has had a close personal relationship for nearly 45 years. Khamenei was Firouzabadi's teacher in religious affairs in the early 1970s, and Firouzabadi became Khamenei's confidant and advisor after the revolution. Khamenei placed Firouzabadi in his current position mere months after his own elevation to the supreme leadership. The publicity and determination with which Firouzabadi worked to shut down criticism of Rouhani coming from IRGC-affiliated media outlets surely reflected Khamenei's strong desires in this matter. The Supreme Leader wanted the IRGC and President Rouhani to work together and stop bickering.

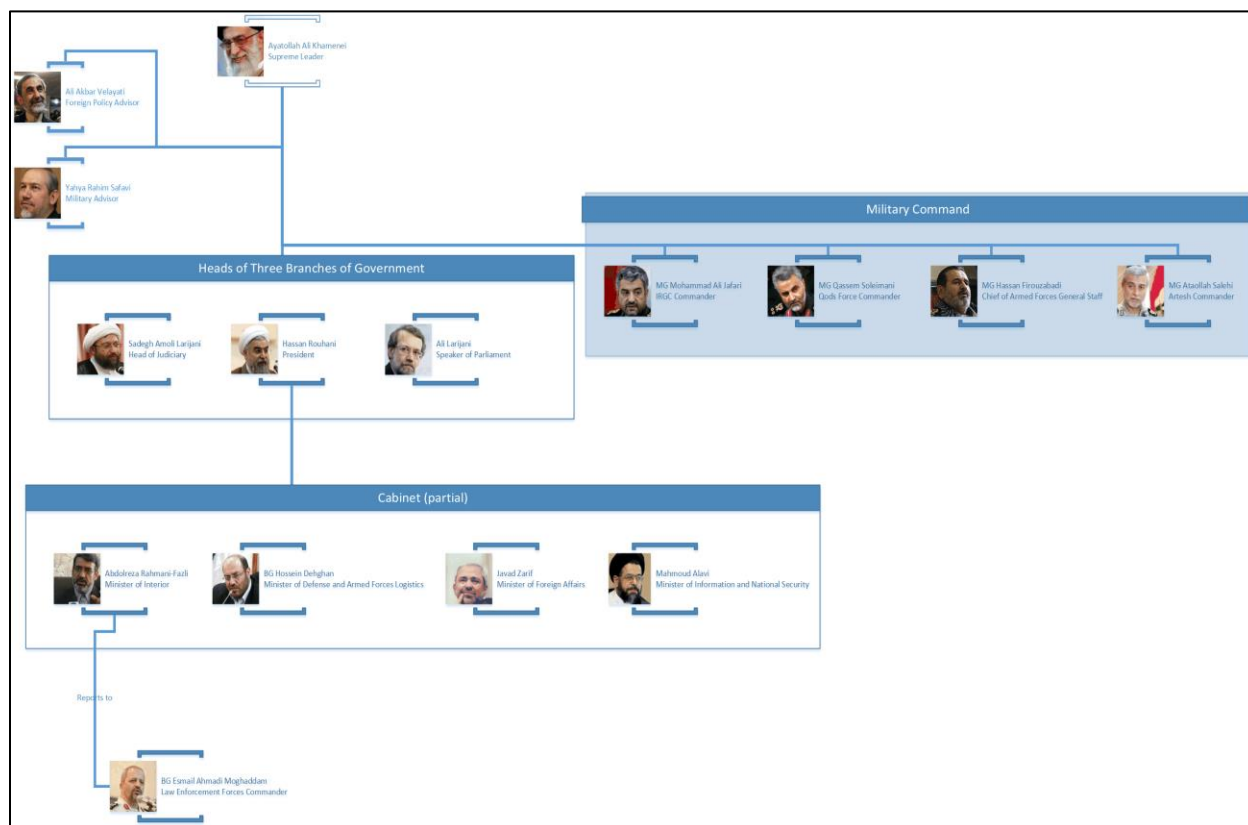
Iran's Functional National Security Structure

Western observers generally emphasize the opacity of the Iranian leadership and what can seem to be an unusual and informal system of decision-making. Yet the initial Iranian reactions to the fall of Mosul were surprisingly in accord with the formal structures of government and national security decision-making. Brigadier General Esmail Ahmadi Moghaddam, commander of the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF—Iran's national police force), announced on June 11 that security was being increased along the Iraq border and warned that pilgrimage travel to Iraq's holy sites might be cancelled.¹⁷ The deputy of the Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization announced the cancellation of all flights to Baghdad and a ban on travel to the Kadhimiyyah Shrine in Iraq's capital in advance of the annual Shabaniyyah pilgrimage to the site on 14 June.¹⁸ A well-connected parliamentarian (and former IRGC commander) Mohammad Esmail Kowsari, however, downplayed the ISIS threat, saying "Iranian armed forces are aware and a small group like [ISIS] is nothing and does not dare create problems within Iran's borders. The Iraqis, however, must be more vigilant than this."¹⁹

But the Supreme Leader took the threat more seriously. The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), former IRGC general Ali Shamkhani, said on June 11 that ISIS attacks have been "a warning call for regional security...It requires serious attention and serious measures from international organizations and governments."²⁰ The SNSC convened the next day. President Rouhani, who attended that meeting, called Maliki while Zarif called his Iraqi counterpart, Hoshyar Zebari.²¹ It seems that Soleimani had already been sent back to Iraq before the SNSC meeting, moreover, as Western media reported that he was present in Baghdad with a (probably overstated) number of IRGC troops on the same day the SNSC met.²²

The SNSC is a very important organ in Iran's national security decision-making process. It consists of the president, speaker of parliament, and judiciary head, the commanders of the armed forces (including the IRGC and Qods Force Commander Soleimani), the director of planning and budget, and the ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Interior, and Intelligence, as well as two representatives of the Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader himself does not generally attend SNSC sessions, but rather receives recommendations from the body that he almost invariably confirms. In rare cases when he is not satisfied with the recommendations, he sometimes convenes members of the SNSC to discuss the issues with him personally before making his decision. The SNSC, particularly via its Secretariat, then promulgates its decisions through the bureaucracy and armed forces for implementation.²³

Iran's Political and Military Leadership



Click image to enlarge. Source: AEI's Critical Threats Project

Iran's reactions to the evolving crisis in Iraq thus show the normal functioning of a national security structure. Officials with formal responsibilities—American equivalents would be the president, National Security Advisor, National Security Council, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, CIA Director, Secretary of Defense—took immediate actions within their purviews and also accurately described the policy process in public. “Insiders” like Member of Parliament Kowsari normally provide insight into regime thinking just as people close to the U.S. president often do, but do not actually have visibility into the details either of the policy process or even, in a fast-moving crisis, of the decision-makers’ recent thinking.

Iran's formal structures even showed the depressingly predictable need to demonstrate their own relevance and competence when an opportunity presents itself. Thus Hojjat-ol Eslam Mahmoud Alavi, the minister of intelligence and national security (MOIS), promised on June 13 to crush any terrorist threats to Iran, while his deputy, Hojjat-ol-Eslam Ali Khazaei said that MOIS had arrested 30 ISIS members in the last month.²⁴ (Hojjat-ol Eslam is a religious rank below Ayatollah in Shi'ism: the MOIS head and deputy are thus relatively senior clerics, rather than strictly military or intelligence professionals). Parliamentarian Mohammad Reza Mohseninejad announced a few days later that the LEF and military had “identified and destroyed more than 20 terrorist teams in the country's eastern region” over the last six months.²⁵ The “wait-for-me!” tone of these statements

suggests institutional or personal insecurity about the role of the MOIS in regime decision-making. Iran's national security apparatus is not as opaque as it might seem, in the end, nor is it as divided as a "team of rivals" concept would suggest.

Threat to the Homeland

Iran's military was busy even before the SNSC meeting. Soleimani was established in Baghdad and reportedly coordinating operations to defend the city by June 13.²⁶ He appears to have brought a staff element of around 120 personnel with him, most likely deployed at the Rashid airbase in southern Baghdad.²⁷ Iraqi Shi'a militias long supported by Iran quickly mobilized, their ranks swelled after Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most important Shi'a religious figure in Iraq (possibly the world), called for popular mobilization to defend against ISIS on June 13.²⁸ Hadi al Amiri, the long-time commander of the Badr Corps (a paramilitary force established by Iran originally to fight Saddam Hussein that subsequently entered the ISF), nominally took control of the defense of Diyala Province, which borders Iran (although other militias operated there as well, as we shall see).²⁹ Abu Mahdi Mohandis, commander of another Iranian-controlled Shi'a militia, Kataib Hezbollah (KH), called for a mobilization on June 16 and emerged as one of Soleimani's de facto deputies.³⁰

The Shi'a militia mobilization had immediate regional consequences, as Iraqi militia groups that had been fighting for Assad in Syria raced home. The Holy Zeinab Brigade, which had been defending the Sayyeda Zeinab Shrine in southern Damascus (and holding down a critical portion of the Assad regime's defenses there) arrived back in Iraq on June 15 and moved rapidly to the defense of Samarra.³¹ Solid reports of the presence of regular IRGC troops in Iraq were confirmed with the death of a member of the IRGC's Saber unit (a kind of special forces), on the same day.³²

These militia mobilizations and movements may well have deterred or prevented ISIS attacks on Baghdad or on Samarra in June, but they could not reverse or even stop the ISIS advances elsewhere. A combination of ISF troops with the Asaib Ahl al Haq militia, controlled by Iranian client Qais Khazali, fought to retake the towns of Muqadiyah and Jalula near the Iranian border in Diyala on June 14 and 15 (it is unclear what became of Hadi al Amiri's supposed responsibility for the province), but ISIS was able to hold many of its positions and even attack Baqubah, the provincial capital, on June 17. The ISF launched another operation near Muqadiyah on June 19, but ISIS responded with advances there, followed by the seizure of Sadia on June 22.³³

Iran-Iraq Border Area



Key cities in Diyala Province, Iraq, near the Iranian border.

The ISIS advance caused a mini-panic on the Iranian side. Social media reported the ISIS threat to retake Khuzestan (the Arab-majority province in southwestern Iran) and the death of Iranian border guards in Kermanshah Province (which borders Iraqi Kurdistan and northern Diyala) on June 20.³⁴ It also claimed that ISIS was 18 kilometers from the Iranian border (although it is unclear that ISIS actually got that close).³⁵ A senior LEF official and the Interior Ministry's public affairs office denied the deaths of the border guards on June 21³⁶—but had to confirm that three LEF officers were killed in Kermanshah on June 24. Initial reports had claimed that those deaths occurred at a border checkpoint, which LEF officials denied, insisting that they resulted from an accident miles away from the border. The changing official story likely aimed to preserve a sense of safety as well as obscure operational details.

The Iranian leadership clearly took the threat to its homeland seriously, however. A senior officer of the Artesh (Iran's conventional military) announced that its forces were on "high alert" along the western and southwestern borders, and the commander of Iran's border forces announced enhanced security measures as well on June 25.³⁷ LEF Commander Ahmadi Moghaddam was in the area himself on June 21 and 26, presiding over change-of-command ceremonies in Kordestan and East Azerbaijan Provinces respectively.³⁸ The Interior Minister went to the border in Kermanshah Province on June 27 and issued reassuring statements.³⁹

Iraqi Government Malformation

Iraqi politics was also approaching a critical moment. The timeline for government formation began with the certification of the election results on June 16 and the announcement that Iraq's Council of Representatives (CoR) would hold its first session on July 2 (it actually met on July 1).⁴⁰ The U.S. had been adding its weight to the pressures on Maliki to step down, which eased off briefly after the fall of Mosul but then gained urgency as the situation appeared to stabilize somewhat.⁴¹ Maliki publicly refused to step aside on June 19 and received a statement of support from Ali Akbar Velayati, foreign policy advisor and close confidant to Khamenei, the same day.⁴²

Velayati's statement likely reflected Khamenei's own position, even though it was delivered during a visit to China, but it appears that support for Maliki was far from universal in Tehran. Western media reported on June 23 that a "senior Iranian official" had said that Iranian support for Maliki was "limited" and "conditional," and that Iranian Ambassador in Baghdad Danaeifar had conveyed that message to Maliki.⁴³ Iranian media reported two days later that Ayatollah Sistani was backing away from his opposition to Maliki, although this report was likely false given Sistani's behavior in July. It was more likely part of what would become a fairly systematic effort by Iranian media to minimize Iraqi opposition to Maliki and support his candidacy (see below). Western media again reported on June 26 that Rouhani wanted Maliki to leave, however, while Khamenei supported him. It also reported that Soleimani had brought a list of possible replacements for Maliki back to Tehran, suggesting that he had been working to arrange an alternative to Maliki with Iraqi politicians.⁴⁴ These reports thus also implied that Soleimani was working with Rouhani against the wishes of the Supreme Leader, which is implausible given the relationships among the three men. Iranian media did not carry reports of opposition to Maliki, nor did Iranian officials make public statements against him, making it impossible to determine whether or not Western media was picking up intentional leaks or actual news. It appears that the Iranian leadership was in some confusion about whether or not to back Maliki at the end of June, however.

Return of the United States?

American statements about Iraq after the fall of Mosul increasingly suggested that U.S. action or inaction would be tied to whether or not Maliki remained in power. The Iranians were naturally interested to see how President Barack Obama would react to the collapse of Iraq and surely read every statement carefully for clues. Obama's first words seemed positive from Tehran's perspective. He said on June 12 that the fall of Mosul should be a "wake-up call" for Iraq's leaders to form an inclusive government and address Sunni grievances while ruling out the possibility of sending U.S. ground troops back to Iraq.⁴⁵ In a brief Rose Garden appearance the next day, he repeated that U.S. forces would not redeploy into Iraq.⁴⁶ Some American commentators optimistically floated the idea of U.S.-Iranian cooperation against ISIS.⁴⁷ Rumors flew about direct U.S.-Iranian discussions about Iraq when the Geneva talks resumed two days later.⁴⁸

When Obama announced the deployment of up to 275 American troops to Iraq that same day, however, Iranian leaders began speaking out against any American involvement in Iraq.⁴⁹ Firouzabadi said on June 18 that there was no need for Iranian military forces in Iraq (by which he presumably meant direct intervention of IRGC or Artesh units) and that there was no question of cooperating with the United States.⁵⁰ Former IRGC Commander and presidential candidate Mohsen Rezaei also rejected the notion of cooperation.⁵¹ Obama's announcement of the movement of even a few hundred U.S. troops back to Iraq may have tipped the scales in Tehran against the idea of cooperating with the U.S., but it is more likely that it merely hastened an inevitable rejection of U.S. intervention.

Washington's vocal opposition to Maliki may also have had the unintended consequence of solidifying Maliki's position with the Supreme Leader. Velayati's statement supporting Maliki on June 19 was accompanied by a careful explanation of how the U.S. and Iran might be working in parallel in Iraq for the moment, but would never be cooperating.⁵² A Maliki alienated by the U.S. might have seemed to be the perfect prime minister for that role. At all events, the Supreme Leader spoke out publicly against any U.S. military involvement in Iraq on June 22, slamming the door on the idea of fighting a common enemy.⁵³ He seems subsequently to have tried to secure Maliki a third term as prime minister as well, as we shall see.

The SNSC convened in an emergency meeting on June 24, presumably to discuss Iraq policy. The meeting was clearly hastily called because IRGC Commander Mohammad Ali Ja'afari and Artesh Commander Major General Ataollah Salehi had to cancel their appearances at a major rally that day, giving the SNSC meeting as an excuse—even though their attendance at the large event had been confirmed two days earlier.⁵⁴ It is impossible to know the meeting's agenda or results, of course, but the circumstantial evidence strongly suggests an attempt to address the disarray in Iran's policies and strategies toward Iraq. Confusion over supporting Maliki, fears of border attacks and possible panics in border provinces, and concern about possible American involvement could all have prompted the Supreme Leader to call things to order.

It is also possible that Khamenei felt the need to respond to pressure from the IRGC to intervene in Iraq more directly. Ja'afari had said on June 23 that the Supreme Leader had ordered the military only to advise and assist Iraq and Syria.⁵⁵ That same day, the commander of the IRGC Mohammad Rasul Allah Unit (responsible for Tehran), Brigadier General Mohsen Kazemeini, had said that the IRGC was ready to fight in Iraq but that the Supreme Leader had not given his permission.⁵⁶ Kazemeini is an important figure in his own right, closely tied into the "command network" that has run the IRGC since the Iran-Iraq War.⁵⁷ He now holds a position from which he can expect to be promoted to even more senior levels in the hierarchy.⁵⁸ Former IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezaei repeated Kazemeini's construction again four days later,⁵⁹ suggesting that the IRGC wanted to fight and that Khamenei was holding them back. Concerns about that tension may have been part of the Supreme Leader's decision to get everyone on the same page at the June 24 meeting. Rezaei's repetition of the meme several days after the meeting could indicate that he was not fully read in to

the Supreme Leader's approach (he was probably not at the meeting itself) or that he was not satisfied with it.

The following week saw two crises subside and a new one emerge. Soleimani, clearly supported by IRGC leadership and resources, had established himself firmly in control of the Iranian effort in Iraq. The immediate threat to Samarra and Baghdad seemed to recede, and the ISF and Shi'a militias were fighting hard in Diyala. IRGC Air Force aircraft and drones operated over Iraq, with social media reporting that they had flown 53 sorties by July 11.⁶⁰ Russian Su-25 ground attack aircraft also appeared in Iraq's skies, at least one of them reportedly flown by an Iranian pilot.⁶¹ It may have appeared from the Iranian perspective that Soleimani was getting some control over the security situation.

Initial indications that the Obama administration might intervene more forcefully in Iraq also proved false. U.S. aircraft did not begin providing direct support to Iraqi troops, as had originally been suggested, nor did Obama show any desire to send more troops. Official talk of cooperation between the U.S. and Iran died down, although outside commentators continued to encourage it, and the Iranians had reason to think that serious U.S. re-engagement in Iraq was unlikely.

The Threat of Kurdish Independence

But Iraq's political crisis continued apace and it spawned a new threat on July 1 when Massoud Barzani announced his intention to hold a referendum to approve full Kurdish independence.⁶² Barzani had been moving in this direction for some time, telling U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on June 24 that there was a "new reality" in Iraq, by which he meant that Kurdistan had de facto already become independent of Baghdad.⁶³ Iranian proxy Qais Khazali had reportedly threatened the Kurds on June 19 and repeated that threat on June 30.⁶⁴ Chairman of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission and reliable regime spokesman, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, blasted the idea of Kurdish secession on July 1 and warned Turkey against encouraging it.⁶⁵

The move toward Kurdish independence proceeded in parallel with a renewed Iraqi effort to push Maliki aside. Sistani's spokesman, Abdul Mahdi Karbalai, said on June 27 that the political blocs should agree on a new prime minister before the CoR met for the first time—making it clear that Sistani did not regard Maliki as the correct choice.⁶⁶ Moqtada Sadr, perhaps Iran's most unreliable proxy in Iraq, said three days later that Maliki should not stand for office.⁶⁷ The principal Sunni political coalition, Mutahidun, announced a new alliance that same day and called on its Shi'a counterpart, the National Alliance (NA), to choose a candidate for prime minister other than Maliki.⁶⁸ Media reports indicated that the NA met that evening at the house of former Prime Minister Ibrahim Ja'afari to discuss who its candidate would be.⁶⁹ Barzani himself directly called on Sistani to intervene to block Maliki from getting a third term on July 2.⁷⁰ Former CoR Speaker

Osama Nujayfi announced the next day that he was withdrawing his own nomination to keep his position because Maliki had made that a precondition of his own withdrawal from the competition for the premiership.⁷¹ The CoR met for the first time on July 1, but the Kurdish delegation withdrew and the session was adjourned until July 8.⁷²

But Maliki was far from done. He reached out to Iran as Haider al Abadi, a close Maliki confidant, said on July 2 that Iraq would seek Iranian air support (or perhaps Turkish) if the U.S. did not provide it, and Maliki himself said he would never step aside on July 4.⁷³ Iran was already providing some air support, as we have seen, a fact confirmed when an Iranian pilot was killed in Iraq on July 5.⁷⁴ Haider al Abadi's statement should probably be seen as an indication that Maliki was willing to align with Tehran in return for Khamenei's support for his prime ministerial bid.

Iranian rhetoric underwent a notable change around this time. Whereas Firouzabadi had said on June 18 that there was no need for Iranian forces in Iraq and senior IRGC commanders had said that the Supreme Leader would not permit them to fight in Iraq on June 23, Minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) Hossein Dehghan declared Iran's willingness to help Iraq militarily on June 30, saying that Tehran desired a "united, secure, and advanced Iraq. It will support any measures in this regard."⁷⁵ The Armed Forces General Staff Deputy for Basij and Cultural Defense Affairs, Brigadier General Massoud Jazayeri, said that same day that Iran "will not deny any aid in any field that Iraq needs, even drones."⁷⁶ He added, "Iraq's disintegration benefits none." These statements differed from those of the previous week in that senior military officials appeared to be promising Iraq military aid rather than exhorting the Supreme Leader to let them do so. Their change in tone suggested that they believed they had gotten or might get the green light to do more in Iraq. The Supreme Leader made no apparent attempts to rein them in.

Intelligence Minister Alavi, interestingly, seems not to have gotten the memo once again. He repeated the earlier talking point that "We have not interfered and will not intervene in Iraq, but will give significant political and spiritual support to the Iraqi nation..."⁷⁷ Since this was the second time Alavi was off-message from the rest of the security leadership, it seems either that he dissented from the consensus view or that he was not closely looped in to the changes in tone among Khamenei's closest confidants. This dissonance suggests, in any case, that the MOIS Chief is not as close with, or perhaps loyal to, the Supreme Leader as other military and even political leaders.

The threat of Kurdish independence riveted Tehran's attention. Within days of Barzani's statement, condemnations of partitioning Iraq came from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman, a member of the Assembly of Experts, leader of the judiciary (and therefore member of the SNSC), Sadegh Larijani, and Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs, Hossein Amir Abdollahian. BAS News, a Kurdish source close to Barzani and opposed to Iran, reported on July 7 that an Iranian delegation met with leaders of the Kurdish parties that are rivals to Barzani. A later report added that the delegation was headed by Iranian Ambassador to Iraq Danaeifar and delivered the message that Kurdish independence would not be acceptable to Iran.⁷⁸ Maliki eagerly added his voice to the anti-Barzani tide, calling Irbil an ISIS bastion on July 9.⁷⁹ When the Kurdish members

of his cabinet withdrew from their positions that same day, he wasted no time in temporarily replacing the one with the highest profile—Hoshyar Zebari, Iraq's foreign minister.⁸⁰ Perhaps most significantly, Jalal Talabani returned from his nearly two-year medical exile on July 19, offering both Tehran and Maliki the hope of dimming Barzani's ardor for political change in Baghdad and for declaring Kurdish independence.⁸¹

The Iranian rhetoric may have coincided with action on the border. BAS News reported a "large number" of Iranian troops deployed on the Kurdish border on July 4.⁸² Five days later it claimed that AAH had established a checkpoint on the Baghdad-Irbil road.⁸³ The only definitive data points available, however, are the declaration by LEF Commander Ahmadi Moghaddam on July 16 that his forces had increased their activities on Iran's border with Kurdistan and the presence of Basij Commander Mohammad Reza Naghdi at a clerical seminar in Kermanshah on July 7.⁸⁴ Volunteers also flowed from Najaf to Kirkuk on July 20, the day after Talabani returned to Iraq. It is quite possible that these volunteers reflected pressure from Tehran to ensure that the Kurds were not solely responsible for protecting Kirkuk from ISIS attacks.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, Back at the Nuclear Negotiating Table...

Iran's national security leadership was not allowed to contemplate these complexities in peace, however, because the nuclear talks had resumed in Geneva on July 2 in advance of the July 20 deadline. The Supreme Leader convened his officials once again for an *iftar*⁸⁶ dinner on July 7 in advance of a major speech he delivered the next day.⁸⁷ Western media picked up the part of the speech clearly aimed at shaping the nuclear negotiations. Khamenei announced that Iran required 190,000 separative work units worth of centrifuge power to sustain its peaceful nuclear program (although it was not clear if he intended this to be a red line for the agreement then under discussion or an aspirational requirement).⁸⁸ This statement was a new formulation designed to bypass the question of number of centrifuges, since Iran could theoretically field very advanced centrifuge cascades with that capability and far fewer individual centrifuges—or it could restrict itself to first-generation centrifuges and insist on fielding many tens of thousands. The formulation confused the issue for the West, with some people saying that Khamenei was demanding 190,000 centrifuges and most reporting missing the fact that he was demanding more than ten times the enrichment capability Iran currently has installed—and 20 times the capability it is currently using.⁸⁹

But Khamenei also repeated his conviction that no deal would eliminate Western sanctions against Iran: "Sanctions will not stop, even if we reach a nuclear agreement. There will always be something... I have several times at this same meeting and various other meetings stated that the nuclear issue is an excuse; there is no nuclear problem, they create excuses for it: that it is a question of human rights, of women's rights, they have invented various issues [for the nuclear problem]; they're forging excuses, their imperialist propaganda machine is also at their disposal." He continued, the "enemy's hand is empty in both fields of sanctions and threats," and "Today we are

witnessing a turning point; if you are not strong you will be strong-armed.” He also mentioned Iraq: “Today, it is the same Americans who are invading Iraq” through the Islamic State. It was a fire-breathing speech that seemed designed to lay down the path for Iran’s national security leaders to follow. It appears to have succeeded.

Boroujerdi repeated the 190,000 SWU formulation on July 10, and Iran’s negotiators apparently refused to move much on their demands for centrifuge capacity, one of the issues that apparently brought the negotiations to a halt.⁹⁰ But the Supreme Leader continued his direct involvement in shaping his government’s policy, meeting with Rouhani again on July 14, the day the president released his economic policy proposals.⁹¹

The Team of Rivals Holds Together

Those proposals might have been expected to cause dissension between Rouhani and the IRGC, since Rouhani’s administration has sought to curtail military spending and to restrict the activities of the IRGC in Iran’s economy. But no sparks flew after his announcement. On the contrary, both sides seemed determined to reconcile and move forward together. Rouhani hosted most of the IRGC and armed forces commanders for an *iftar* dinner on July 16.⁹² Such an event does not appear to be traditional, since we have not been able to find reporting of similar *iftar* dinners from previous years. It seems, rather, to be part of an effort to keep the senior leadership welded together and focused on external threats and challenges.

Rouhani thus took the opportunity during a cabinet meeting at which he criticized Israel for its operations in Gaza to say, “The desire of the eleventh administration [Rouhani’s government] is peace and eliminating tension in the region. It believes that fulfilling this goal is possible with strong armed forces.”⁹³ He received support in turn from the Iranian Parliament, with parliamentarians releasing a statement supporting the Iranian nuclear negotiating team, while repeating the Supreme Leader’s demand for 190,000 SWUs.⁹⁴ A major op-ed by politician Mohsen Rezaei the next day even offered tentative support for Rouhani’s reforms: “Economy and culture are still important but the change in the region’s geopolitical map is more important.”⁹⁵ The day after that, the Tehran interim Friday Prayer Leader, Hojjat-ol Eslam Kazem Sedighi, was even more emphatic: “We also announce that, by God, we approve and support the administration just as the Supreme Leader said to approve and support it.”⁹⁶

Sedighi’s sermon was part of a concerted messaging and negotiation effort in support of Maliki’s candidacy. Iranian media coverage of the Iraqi election crisis in the previous week had shown an attempt to support Maliki, if quietly. It reported on July 7 that Sistani’s son denied that his father was rejecting Maliki’s candidacy, a statement that drew an immediate response the next day from sources claiming to be close to Sistani denying the denial.⁹⁷ The IRGC magazine *Sobb-e Sadegh* reported three days later that Sistani had told Maliki to form a national coalition, implying that he

was somehow endorsing Maliki for a third term, even if conditionally.⁹⁸ Sistani in fact apparently gave Maliki an ultimatum on July 14: stand down voluntarily or Sistani would publicly announce his opposition.⁹⁹ Iranian media did not report that ultimatum.

Sedighi now made Iranian support for Maliki more explicit. “God willing,” he said, “the elections of the [Iraqi] President and PM will reach a result with the correct understanding of officials, born out of the people’s ballots.” Since Maliki’s Dawa Party had the highest number of seats, the implication of support for Maliki was clear. Boroujerdi drew implicit comparisons between Maliki and Assad, moreover: “One of the views [regarding Syria] was that it was possible for Bashar Assad to fall and we should seek an alternative. In political decision making, doubt is the most dangerous pest. It was the system’s determination for Assad to stay and for Obama and the rest of his European allies to leave. The reason for the system’s decision was clear. Syria was considered the front line of the Resistance Front.”¹⁰⁰ This statement suggests that the Iranian leadership, probably reaching all the way to Khamenei, had come to see keeping Maliki in office in the same light in which they had seen the importance of retaining Assad in power.

SNSC Secretary Shamkhani was in Iraq the same day Sedighi spoke, meeting Maliki but also meeting Sistani and other clerics in Najaf. His meeting with Sistani was noteworthy because Sistani rarely meets with outsiders.¹⁰¹ Even senior American and Iraqi officials are much more likely to interact with him through his interlocutors than to meet him directly. When an Iraqi says “I spoke with His Eminence,” it is a boast and a mark of pride. This publicly-announced meeting with Shamkhani was therefore an indication of the seriousness with which Sistani took Khamenei’s approach.

The effects of Shamkhani’s interactions remain unclear. Sistani’s ultimatum to Maliki expired on July 21, yet Sistani has made no public statement following through on his threat to oppose Maliki publicly. The closest he came was on July 25, when his representative noted that politicians should not “cling” to their offices.¹⁰² The *Wall Street Journal* reported Sistani’s opposition on July 23 and added a statement by Hoshyar Zebari that “Iran ‘will align with what Sistani would like to see.’...He said he couldn't confirm that Iran told Mr. Maliki they no longer supported his continued bid for power, but said ‘they would not oppose Sistani's judgment or preferences.’”¹⁰³ The *Associated Press* added to the story, reporting that Soleimani had told Maliki to step aside and that Maliki had refused to do so.¹⁰⁴

It is possible that Khamenei has had to back away from his support for Maliki, despite his efforts to secure the prime minister a third term. Iraq is not Syria, and Maliki has nothing like the control over the Iraqi political system—even after many years of placing loyalists in key posts and purging adversaries—that Assad does over Syria’s. If Maliki’s support among his own coalition frays enough—which it well might if Sistani remains implacable—then he may have to choose between stepping aside and trying some kind of quasi-judicial coup, perhaps through an emergency decree pro-rogueing the CoR. Indications that Maliki’s support is collapsing are multiplying: his Dawa Party reportedly issued a statement on July 26 echoing Sistani’s call for politicians not to “cling” to positions.¹⁰⁵ Khamenei may have been forced to reconcile himself to seeing Maliki go, since the

alternatives of supporting a Maliki coup—or of directly contesting the will of Sistani—are much less palatable. Shi'a political elites in Iraq are likeliest to reach consensus based on Sistani's guidance and sustain it over time. A Shi'a candidate proposed by the National Alliance and supported by the Dawa Party will likely be acceptable to Iran.

What Lies Ahead?

Khamenei has brought Iran's normally fractious political and military elite together into a coherent and effective team. The Supreme Leader has played a very active and very public role in this effort, not merely unifying his team of rivals—at least for the moment—but also rallying them around a set of very specific policies and strategies of his own.

Public disagreements will certainly reappear within the Iranian ruling clique. Rouhani's economic reforms will hurt elements of the IRGC and other major players in the Iranian economy, who will resist and push back. Hard-core religious extremists continue to detest Rouhani's technocratic approach to cultural policy and will certainly begin to attack it again. It is also quite likely that continued nuclear negotiations will require more indications of a willingness by the Iranian government to yield on core issues that will arouse the ire and critiques of various groups. It is very unlikely to be smooth sailing for Khamenei or any of his principal subordinates.

But Tehran has weathered a very nasty storm reasonably well, although Iran's leaders are far from triumphant or complacent. Khamenei got an extension of the nuclear negotiations—with a \$2.8 billion additional windfall in released assets (currently being challenged in Congress)¹⁰⁶—without any complaint from opponents of the Rouhani government. Rouhani, for his part, released his economic policies without provoking criticisms from the IRGC or its proxies. And the national security establishment appears to be working cohesively in support of Iraqi government formation and against Kurdish pretensions to independence. Khamenei has reason to be cautiously optimistic about his ability to continue to guide his country through the further storms that lie ahead.

The implications for American and Western interests are less positive. Khamenei continues to reiterate his hatred for the U.S., his conviction that America is behind the Islamic State and an enemy to be driven from Iraq and the region, and his belief that no concessions he might make would end the sanctions regime—a belief that is likely to make him intransigent on the core issues of dispute in the upcoming negotiations. The fact that he has shown himself to be so firmly in control of Iranian policy and strategy on all of these matters means that these are the positions we can expect to face from Tehran for the foreseeable future.

The fact that Rouhani has not only accepted these positions but received positive affirmation from his erstwhile opponents is perhaps even more significant and alarming. The notion that Rouhani is somehow an outsider, a voice of reason, someone the U.S. can do business with, the hope for real

change in the Islamic Republic cannot coexist with the realities we have observed. Rouhani was never an outsider, never an opponent of the regime, and never a leader likely to change the course of Iranian policy fundamentally. He is, rather, a loyal reformer who seeks to change the system in order to strengthen it. Khamenei's willingness to drive his unruly servants to support Rouhani is evidence of Rouhani's commitment to the Supreme Leader's ideals and values. Rouhani may, in fact, be the most dangerous possible president for the West—a competent technocrat willing to make painful changes, but only in the service of an ideology and strategy that sees the U.S. as an enemy to be defeated. If Iran's response to recent crises tells us anything, it is that we must be very much on guard with Rouhani and his team.

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