STUDY NOTES · BASIC CONCEPT

How is Iran's Supreme leader chosen?

International Relations

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Following the confirmed death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on March 1, 2026, Iran's leadership transition is governed by the country's 1989 constitution (with amendments). The process is secretive, clerical-dominated, and can be influenced by internal power struggles, especially amid the ongoing US-Israeli strikes and regional instability.

Step-by-Step Selection Process

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1. **Immediate Interim Leadership**: Upon the Supreme Leader's death, a temporary council assumes his duties to ensure continuity. This council typically includes:
    - The President (currently Masoud Pezeshkian, a reformist).
    - The Judiciary Chief (Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei).
    - A member of the Guardian Council (a 12-member body that vets candidates and laws). This setup prevents a power vacuum and handles day-to-day governance until a permanent successor is chosen.
2. **Role of the Assembly of Experts**: The permanent Supreme Leader is elected by the Assembly of Experts, an 88-member body of Shiite clerics.
    - Members are elected by popular vote every eight years, but candidates must be vetted and approved by the Guardian Council to ensure ideological alignment.
    - The Assembly convenes in a closed session to deliberate and vote. A simple majority is needed, though consensus is often sought.
    - They can elect a single individual or, in theory, a small council of clerics (though this has never happened).
    - The process can take days, weeks, or longer, especially if there's no pre-designated heir (Khamenei did not publicly name one).
3. **Qualifications for Supreme Leader**:
    - Must be a high-ranking Shiite cleric (typically a Grand Ayatollah or Marja').
    - Demonstrated piety, justice, political acumen, and adherence to the principles of the Islamic Revolution.

    - The Assembly can also remove a leader if deemed unfit (though this is rare).
4. **Historical Precedent**: After Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death in 1989, Khamenei was quickly elected despite not being a Grand Ayatollah at the time (his rank was elevated). The session was emotional and influenced by Khomeini's recommendation.

In the current crisis, the process may be disrupted by military actions, internal unrest, or IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) influence, potentially leading to a hardline or collective leadership.

Potential Successors to Khamenei

There's no clear frontrunner, and speculation is rampant. The successor will likely be a hardliner aligned with the IRGC to maintain regime stability amid war. Based on recent reports and analyses (as of March 1, 2026), here are the most frequently mentioned candidates:

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Candidate	Age	Key Background & Strengths	Potential Challenges
Mojtaba Khamenei	56	Second son of Ali Khamenei; influential cleric with strong ties to IRGC and Basij militias; behind-the-scenes power broker; long rumored as heir.	Nepotism concerns could spark backlash, as the revolution opposed monarchy; controversial due to family ties.
Alireza Arafi	67	Senior cleric; heads Iran's seminaries; Assembly of Experts member; appointed to interim leadership council; institutional credibility.	Less charismatic; may be seen as a placeholder rather than long-term leader.
Mohsen Qomi	~60s	Close adviser to Khamenei; deputy head of the Supreme Leader's office; trusted insider with theological and political experience.	Limited public profile; may lack broad support base.
Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei	69	Current Judiciary Chief; hardliner with IRGC ties; part of interim council; experienced in suppressing dissent.	Associated with crackdowns, which could alienate reformists.
Sadeq Larijani	64	Former Judiciary Chief; heads Expediency Council; brother of Ali Larijani; conservative cleric with political clout.	Family dynasty concerns; past corruption allegations.

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Mohsen Araki	~60s	Assembly of Experts member; theologian with international ties (e.g., to Iraq's Shiite community).	Lower profile compared to others.
Ali Larijani	68	Former Parliament Speaker; pragmatic conservative; recently speculated in acting roles.	More moderate, which might not appeal to hardliners.
Hassan Khomeini	53	Grandson of founder Ruhollah Khomeini; reform-leaning cleric; popular among youth.	Too progressive for the establishment; previously barred from Assembly.
Ahmad Vahidi	67	Former IRGC deputy; current Interior Minister; hardliner with military background.	Not a cleric, which is traditionally required (though rules could bend).

Other possibilities include a collective leadership or IRGC dominance if clerics falter. Recent X posts indicate Alireza Arafi has been named to an interim role, but no permanent successor yet.

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