

[Home](#) > [Imam Khomeini: A Short Biography](#) > 1979–89: first decade of the Islamic Republic, last decade of the Imam’s life

1979–89: first decade of the Islamic Republic, last decade of the Imam’s life

Imam Khomeini’s role was also central in shaping the new political order that emerged from the revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran. At first it appeared that he might exercise his directive role from Qum, for he moved there from Tehran on February 29, causing Qum to become in effect a second capital of Iran.

On March 30 and 31, a nationwide referendum resulted in a massive vote in favor of the establishment of an Islamic Republic. The Imam proclaimed the next day, April 1, 1979, as the “first day of God’s government.”¹ The institutionalization of the new order continued with the election, on August 3, of an Assembly of Experts (*Majlis-i Khubragan*), entrusted with the task of reviewing a draft constitution that had been put forward on June 18; fifty-five of the seventy-three persons elected were religious scholars.

It was not however to be expected that a smooth transition from the old regime would prove possible. The powers and duties of the Council of the Islamic Revolutionary, which was intended to serve as an interim legislature, were not clearly delineated from those of the provisional government headed by Bazargan.

More importantly, significant differences of outlook and approach separated the two bodies from each other. The council, composed predominantly of *ulama*, favored immediate and radical change and sought to strengthen the revolutionary organs that had come into being – the revolutionary committees, the revolutionary courts charged with punishing members of the former regime charged with serious crimes, and the Corps of Guards of the Islamic Revolution (*Sipah-i Pasdaran-i Inqilab-i Islami*), established on May 5, 1979. The government, headed by Bazargan and comprising mainly liberal technocrats of Islamic orientation, sought as swift a normalization of the situation as possible and the gradual phasing out of the revolutionary institutions.

Although Imam Khomeini encouraged members of the two bodies to cooperate and refrained, on most occasions, from arbitrating their differences, his sympathies were clearly with the Council of the Islamic Revolution.

On July 1, Bazargan offered the Imam his resignation. It was refused, and four members of the council – Rafsanjani, Bahonar, Mahdavi-Kani, and Ayatullah Sayyid ‘Ali Khamna’i – joined Bazargan’s cabinet in an effort to improve the coordination of the two bodies. In addition to these frictions at the governmental level, a further element of instability was provided by the terrorist activities of shadowy groups that were determined to rob the nascent Islamic republic of some of its most capable personalities.

Thus on May 1, 1979, Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari, a leading member of the Council of the Islamic Revolution and a former pupil close to the Imam’s heart, was assassinated in Tehran. For once, the Imam wept in an open display of grief.

The final break between Bazargan and the revolution came as a consequence of the occupation of the United States embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979 by a coalition of students from the universities of Tehran. Despite declarations of willingness to “honor the will of the Iranian people” and its recognition of the Islamic Republic, the American government had admitted the Shah to the United States on October 22, 1979.

The pretext was his need for medical treatment, but it was widely feared in Iran that his arrival in America, where large numbers of high-ranking officials of the previous regime had gathered, might be the prelude to an American-sponsored attempt to restore him to power, on the lines of the successful CIA coup of August 1953. The Shah’s extradition to Iran was therefore demanded by the students occupying the embassy as a condition for their liberating the hostages they were holding there.

It is probable that the students had cleared their action in advance with close associates of Imam Khomeini, for he swiftly extended his protection to them, proclaiming their action “a greater revolution than the first.”² Two days later, he predicted that confronted by this “second revolution,” America would be “unable to do a damned thing (*Amrika hich ghalati namitavanad bukunad*).”³

This prediction seemed extravagant to many in Iran, but a military expedition mounted by the United States on April 22, 1980 to rescue the American hostages and possibly, too, to attack sensitive sites in Tehran, came to an abrupt and humiliating end when the American gunship crashed into each other in a sandstorm near Tabas in southeastern Iran.

On April 7, the United States had formally broken diplomatic ties with Iran, a move welcomed by Imam Khomeini as an occasion of rejoicing for the Iranian nation.⁴ It was not until January 21, 1981 that the American hostages were finally released.

Two days after the occupation of the US embassy, Bazargan once again offered his resignation, and this time it was accepted. In addition, the provisional government was dissolved, and the Council of the Islamic Revolution temporarily assumed the task of running the country.

This marked the definitive departure of Bazargan and like-minded individuals from the scene; henceforth the term “liberal” became a pejorative designation for those who questioned the fundamental tendencies of the revolution. In addition, the students occupying the embassy had access to extensive files the Americans had kept on various Iranian personalities who had frequented the embassy over the years; these documents were now published and discredited the personalities involved.

Most importantly, the occupation of the embassy constituted a “second revolution” in that Iran now offered a unique example of defiance of the American superpower and became established for American policymakers as their principal adversary in the Middle East.

The enthusiasm aroused by the occupation of the embassy also helped to ensure a large turnout for the referendum that was held on December 2 and 3, 1979 to ratify the constitution that had been approved by the Assembly of Experts on November 15. The constitution, which was overwhelmingly approved, differed greatly from the original draft, above all through its inclusion of the principle of *vilayat-i faqih* as its basic and determining principle. Mentioned briefly in the preamble, it was spelled out in full in Article Five:

“During the Occultation of the Lord of the Age (Sahib al-Zaman; i.e., the Twelfth Imam)... the governance and leadership of the nation devolve upon the just and pious *faqih* who is acquainted with the circumstances of his age; courageous, resourceful, and possessed of administrative ability; and recognized and accepted as leader (rahbar) by the majority of the people. In the event that no *faqih* should be so recognized by the majority, the leader, or leadership council, composed of *fuqaha*⁷ possessing the aforementioned qualifications, will assume these responsibilities.”

Article 109 specified the qualifications and attributes of the leader as “suitability with respect to learning and piety, as required for the functions of mufti and marja’.” Article 110 listed his powers, which include supreme command of the armed forces, appointment of the head of the judiciary, signing the decree formalizing the election of the president of the republic, and – under certain conditions – dismissing him.⁵

These articles formed the constitutional basis for Imam Khomeini’s leadership role. In addition, from July 1979 onwards, he had been appointing Imam Jum’ah’s for every major city, who not only delivered the Friday sermon but also acted as his personal representatives. Most government institutions also had a representative of the Imam assigned to them. However, the ultimate source of his influence was his vast moral and spiritual prestige, which led to him being designated primarily as Imam, in the sense of one dispensing comprehensive leadership to the community.⁶

On January 23, 1980, Imam Khomeini was brought from Qum to Tehran to receive treatment for a heart ailment. After thirty–nine days in hospital, he took up residence in the north Tehran suburb of Darband, and on April 22 he moved into a modest house in Jamaran, another suburb to the north of the capital. A closely guarded compound grew up around the house, and it was there that he was destined to spend the rest of his life.

On January 25, during the Imam’s hospitalization, Abu’l–Hasan Bani Sadr, a French–educated economist, was elected first president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. His success had been made possible in part by the Imam’s decision that it was not opportune to have a religious scholar stand for election. This event, followed on March 14 by the first elections to the *Majlis*, might have counted as a further step to the institutionalization and stabilization of the political system.

However, Bani Sadr’s tenure, together with the tensions that soon arose between him and a majority of the deputies in the *Majlis*, occasioned a severe crisis that led ultimately to Bani Sadr’s dismissal. For the president, his inherent megalomania aggravated by his victory at the polls, was reluctant to concede supremacy to Imam Khomeini, and he therefore attempted to build up a personal following, consisting largely of former leftists who owed their positions exclusively to him.

In this enterprise, he inevitably clashed with the newly formed Islamic Republic Party (*Hizb–i Jumhuri–yi Islami*), headed by Ayatullah Bihishti, which dominated the *Majlis* and was loyal to what was referred to as “the line of the Imam” (*khatt–i Imam*). As he had earlier done with the disputes between the provisional government and the Council of the Islamic Revolution, the Imam sought to reconcile the parties, and on September 11 1980 appealed to all branches of government and their members to set aside their differences.

While this new governmental crisis was brewing, on September 22, 1980, Iraq sent its forces across the Iranian border and launched a war of aggression that was to last for almost eight years. Iraq enjoyed financial support in this venture from the Arab states lining the Persian Gulf, above all from Saudi Arabia.

Imam Khomeini, however, correctly regarded the United States as the principal instigator of the war from the outset, and American involvement became increasingly visible as the war wore on. Although Iraq advanced territorial claims against Iran, the barely disguised purpose of the aggression was to take advantage of the dislocations caused in Iran by the revolution, particularly the weakening of the army through purges of disloyal officers, and to destroy the Islamic Republic.

As he had done during the revolution, Imam Khomeini insisted on an uncompromising stance and inspired a steadfast resistance, which prevented the easy Iraqi victory many foreign observers had confidently foretold. Initially, however, Iraq enjoyed some success, capturing the port city of Khurramshahr and encircling Abadan.

The conduct of the war became one more issue at dispute between Bani Sadr and his opponents. Continuing his efforts at reconciling the factions, Imam Khomeini established a three-man commission to investigate the complaints each had against the other. The commission reported on June 1, 1981 that Bani Sadr was guilty of violating the constitution and contravening the Imam's instructions. He was accordingly declared incompetent by the *Majlis* to function as president, and the next day, in accordance with Article 110 section (e) of the constitution, Imam Khomeini dismissed him. He went into hiding, and on July 28 fled to Paris, disguised as a woman.

Toward the end of his presidency, Bani Sadr had allied himself with the *Sazman-i Mujahidin-i Khalq* (Organization of People's Strugglers; however, the group is commonly known in Iran as munafiqin, "hypocrites," not mujahidin, because of its members' hostility to the Islamic Republic). An organization with a tortuous ideological and political history, it had hoped, like Bani Sadr, to displace Imam Khomeini and capture power for itself.

After Bani Sadr went into exile, members of the organization embarked on a campaign of assassinating government leaders in the hope that the Islamic Republic would collapse. Even before Bani Sadr fled, a massive explosion had destroyed the headquarters of the Islamic Republic Party, killing more than seventy people including Ayatullah Bihishti.

On August 30, 1981, Muhammad 'Ali Raja'i, Bani Sadr's successor as president, was killed in another explosion. Other assassinations followed over the next two years, including five Imam Jum'a's as well as a host of lesser figures. Throughout these disasters, Imam Khomeini maintained his customary composure, declaring, for example, after the assassination of Raja'i that the killings would change nothing and in fact showed Iran to be "the most stable country in the world," given the ability of the government to continue functioning in an orderly manner.⁷

The fact that Iran was able to withstand such blows internally while continuing the war of defense against Iraq was indeed testimony to the roots the new order had struck and to the undiminished prestige of Imam Khomeini as the leader of the nation.

Ayatullah Khamna'i, a longtime associate and devotee of the Imam, was elected president on October 2, 1981, and he remained in this position until he succeeded him as leader of the Islamic Republic on his death in 1989. No governmental crises comparable to those of the first years of the Islamic Republic occurred during his tenure. Nonetheless, structural problems persisted.

The constitution provided that legislation passed by the *Majlis* should be reviewed by a body of senior *fuqaha'* known as the Council of Guardians (*Shaura-yi Nagahban*) to ensure its conformity with the provisions of Ja'fari *fiqh*. This frequently led to a stalemate on a variety of important legislative issues.

On at least two occasions, in October 1981 and January 1983, Hashimi-Rafsanjani, then chairman of

the *Majlis*, requested the Imam to arbitrate decisively, drawing on the prerogatives inherent in the doctrine of *vilayat-i faqih*, in order to break the deadlock. He was reluctant to do so, always preferring that a consensus should emerge.

However, on January 6, 1988, in a letter addressed to Khamna'i, the Imam put forward a far-reaching definition of *vilayat-i faqih*, now termed "absolute" (*mutlaqa*), which made it theoretically possible for the leadership to override all conceivable objections to the policies it supported. Governance, Imam Khomeini proclaimed, is the most important of all divine ordinances (*ahkam-i ilahi*) and it takes precedence over secondary divine ordinances (*ahkam-i far'iya-yi ilahiya*).

Not only does the Islamic state permissibly enforce a large number of laws not mentioned specifically in the sources of the *shari'a*, such as the prohibition of narcotics and the levying of customs dues; it can also suspend the performance of a fundamental religious duty, the hajj, when this is necessitated by the higher interest of the Muslims.⁸

At first sight, the theory of *vilayat-i mutlaqa-yi faqih* might appear to be a justification for unlimited individual rule by the leader (*rahbar*). One month later, however, Imam Khomeini delegated these broadly defined prerogatives to a commission named the Assembly for the Determination of the Interest of the Islamic Order (*Majma'-i Tashkhis-i Maslahat-i Nizam-i Islami*.) This standing body has the power to settle decisively all differences on legislation between the *Majlis* and the Council of Guardians.

The war against Iraq continued to preoccupy Iran until July 1988. Iran had come to define its war aims as not simply the liberation of all parts of its territory occupied by Iraq, but also the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Husayn. A number of military victories made this goal appear attainable.

On November 29, 1981, Imam Khomeini congratulated his military commanders on successes achieved in Khuzestan, remarking that the Iraqis had been obliged to retreat before the faith of the Iranian troops and their eagerness for martyrdom.⁹

The following year, on May 24, Khurramshahr, which had been held by the Iraqis since shortly after the outbreak of war, was liberated, and only small pockets of Iranian territory remained in Iraqi hands. The Imam marked the occasion by condemning anew the Persian Gulf states that supported Saddam Husayn and describing the victory as a divine gift.¹⁰

Iran failed, however, to follow up swiftly on its surprise victory and the momentum, which might have made possible the destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime, was lost as the tide of war flowed back and forth. The United States was, in any event, determined to deny Iran a decisive victory and stepped up its intervention in the conflict in a variety of ways.

Finally, on July 2, 1988, the US navy stationed in the Persian Gulf shot down a civilian Iranian airliner, with the loss of 290 passengers. With the utmost reluctance, Imam Khomeini agreed to end the war on the terms specified in Resolution 598 of the United Nations Security Council, comparing his decision in a

lengthy statement issued on July 20 to the drinking of poison. [11](#)

Any notion that the acceptance of a ceasefire with Iraq signaled a diminution in the Imam's readiness to confront the enemies of Islam was dispelled when, on February 14, 1989, he issued a *fatwa* calling for the execution of Salman Rushdie, author of the obscene and blasphemous novel, *The Satanic Verses*, as well as those responsible for the publication and dissemination of the work.

The *fatwa* received a great deal of support in the Muslim world as the most authoritative articulation of popular outrage at Rushdie's gross insult to Islam. Although its demand remained unfulfilled, it demonstrated plainly the consequences that would have to be faced by any aspiring imitator of Rushdie, and thus had an important deterrent effect.

Generally overlooked at the time was the firm grounding of the Imam's *fatwa* in the existing provisions of both Shi'i and Sunni jurisprudence; it was not therefore innovative. What lent the *fatwa* particular significance was rather its issuance by the Imam as a figure of great moral authority.

The Imam had also gained the attention of the outside world, albeit in a less spectacular way, on January 4, 1989, when he sent Mikhail Gorbachev, then general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a letter in which he predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of communism: "Henceforth it will be necessary to look for communism in the museums of political history of the world."

He also warned Gorbachev and the Russian people against replacing communism with Western-style materialism: "The basic problem of your country has nothing to do with ownership, the economy, or freedom; it is the lack of a true belief in God, the same problem that has drawn the West into a blind alley of triviality and purposelessness." [12](#)

Internally, however, the most important development in the last year of Imam Khomeini's life was, without doubt, his dismissal of Ayatullah Muntaziri from the position of successor to the leadership of the Islamic Republic.

Once a student and close associate of the Imam, who had gone so far as to call him "the fruit of my life," Muntaziri had had among his associates over the years persons executed for counterrevolutionary activity, including a son-in-law, Mahdi Hashimi, and made far-reaching criticisms of the Islamic Republic, particularly with regard to judicial matters.

On July 31, 1988, he wrote a letter to the Imam questioning what he regarded as unjustified executions of members of the Sazman-i Mujahidin-I Khalq held in Iranian prisons after the organization, from its base in Iraq, had made a large-scale incursion into Iranian territory in the closing stages of the Iran-Iraq war. Matters came to a head the following year, and on March 28, 1989, the Imam wrote to Muntaziri accepting his resignation from the succession, a resignation that under the circumstances he was

compelled to offer. [13](#)

On June 3, 1989, after eleven days in hospital for an operation to stop internal bleeding, Imam Khomeini lapsed into a critical condition and died. The outpouring of grief was massive and spontaneous, the exact counterpoint to the vast demonstrations of joy that had greeted his return to Iran a little over ten years earlier.

Such was the press of mourners, estimated at some nine million that the body ultimately had to be transported by helicopter to its place of burial to the south of Tehran on the road leading to Qum. A still expanding complex of structures has grown up around the shrine of the Imam, making it likely that it will become the center of an entire new city devoted to ziyara and religious learning.

The testament of Imam Khomeini was published soon after his death. A lengthy document, it addresses itself principally to the various classes of Iranian society, urging them to do whatever is necessary for the preservation and strengthening of the Islamic Republic. Significantly, however, it begins with an extended meditation on the *hadith-i thaqalayn*: “I leave among you two great and precious things: the Book of God and my progeny; they will never be separated from each other until they meet me at the pool.”

The Imam interprets the misfortunes that have befallen Muslims throughout history and more particularly in the present age as the result of efforts precisely to disengage the Qur’an from the progeny of the Prophet (S).

The legacy of Imam Khomeini was considerable. He had bequeathed to Iran not only a political system enshrining the principles both of religious leadership and of an elected legislature and head of the executive branch, but also a whole new ethos and self-image, a dignified stance of independence vis-à-vis the West are in the Muslim world.

He was deeply imbued with the traditions and worldview of Shi’i Islam, but he viewed the revolution he had led and the republic he had founded as the nucleus for a worldwide awakening of all Muslims. He had sought to attain this goal by, among other things, issuing proclamations to the hujjaj on a number of occasions, and alerting them to the dangers arising from American dominance of the Middle East, the tireless activity of Israel for subverting the Muslim world, and the subservience to America and Israel of numerous Middle Eastern governments.

Unity between Shi’is and Sunnis was one of his lasting concerns; he was, indeed, the first Shi’i authority to declare unconditionally valid prayers performed by Shi’is behind a Sunni imam. [14](#)

It must finally be stressed that despite the amplitude of his political achievements, Imam Khomeini’s personality was essentially that of a gnostic for whom political activity was but the natural outgrowth of

an intense inner life of devotion. The comprehensive vision of Islam that he both articulated and exemplified is, indeed, his most significant legacy.

- [1.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, V, p. 233.
- [2.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, X, p. 141.
- [3.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, X, p. 149.
- [4.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XII, p. 40.
- [5.](#) Qanun-i Asasi-yi Jumhuri-yi Islami-yi Iran, Tehran, 1370 Sh./1991, pp. 23-24, 53-58.
- [6.](#) Suggestions that the use of this title assimilated him to the Twelve Imams of Shi'i belief and hence attributed infallibility to him are groundless.
- [7.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XV, p. 130.
- [8.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XX, pp. 170-71.
- [9.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XV, p. 234.
- [10.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XVI, pp. 154-5.
- [11.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XXI, pp. 227-44.
- [12.](#) Ava-yi Tauhid, Tehran, 1367 Sh./1989, pp. 3-5.
- [13.](#) Sahifa-yi Nur, XXI, p. 112.
- [14.](#) Istifta'at, I, p. 279.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/imam-khomeini-short-biography-hamid-algar/1979-89-first-decade-islamic-republic-last-decade-imams#comment-0>