

Iran's Political Elite

Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani

Abdi, Abbas (1956–) A leading journalist and political analyst. He was one of the students who took over the American embassy on November 4, 1979, and in 1999, he took part in a debate with one of the former hostages at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. An engineer by training, he served after the revolution in the intelligence agencies, the judiciary and the Center for Strategic Studies, which is affiliated with the Office of the President. He was imprisoned for eight months in 1993 for writing critical columns in the *Salam* newspaper and later served a three-year jail term (2002–2005) for conducting a poll on behalf of Gallup that showed more than 74 percent of Iranians were interested in rapprochement with the United States. After his release, he began writing for the reformist newspaper Etemaad.

Ahmadinejad, Mahmoud (1956–) A conservative populist politician who won 61 percent of the votes in a runoff presidential election against former president Rafsanjani in 2005. He was reelected in a disputed vote in 2009 that gave birth to the opposition Green Movement. Son of a blacksmith, he earned a doctorate in transport engineering and served with both the Basij and Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) during the Iran-Iraq War. In his website profile, he claimed that during the war he worked as a Basiji volunteer in the engineering group in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan. He reportedly became a member of the IRGC in 1986 when he joined the Special Forces division of IRGC. Afterwards, he served as governor general of Khoi and Mako, governor of Ardabil, mayor of Tehran (2003-2005), and then president. His acerbic comments about Israel and the United States and his messianic discourse, made him a controversial figure in international politics.

During Ahmadinejad's second term as president, Iran faced increasing challenges. Sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union and others under U.N. Security Council resolutions took a heavy toll on the economy. Oil exports were halved, and Iranian banks had a hard time conducting international transactions. In 2011, the president and the supreme leader had a falling out over the selection of the intelligence minister. Ahmadinejad finished his second term in August 2013. In August 2015, he announced his intention to run in the February 2016 parliamentary elections.

Asgaroladi, Habibollah (1932–) A heavyweight in the conservative political camp. There are rumors that his family was originally of Jewish descent and converted to Islam during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi. He served for many years as the secretary-general of the Islamic Coalition Party (*Hezb-e Mo'talefeh-ye Eslami*), the supreme leader's representative on the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (the biggest governmental charity serving 10 million poor people), a member of Parliament, the commerce minister

(1981–1983), and a member of the Expediency Council. He also twice (1981 and 1985) ran unsuccessfully as a candidate for the presidency.

Bahonar, Mohammad-Reza (1952–) A powerful conservative member of Parliament who has so far served six terms in the chamber (often in leadership posts) as well as three terms in the Expediency Council. He served as First Deputy Speaker of Parliament from 2011 to 2012 and [became](#) Second Deputy Speaker in 2015. He and like-minded colleagues founded the influential Islamic Society of Engineers (*Jame'eh-ye Eslami-ye Mohandesin*) in 1991. His older brother, Mohammad-Javad Bahonar, served only for 26 days as Iran's prime minister before a bomb claimed his life as well as that of President Mohammad-Ali Raja'i in 1981.

Bani-Sadr, Abolhassan (1933–) Iran's first post-revolutionary president. Son of an ayatollah, he studied economics before the revolution in France but did not finish his dissertation. In January 1980, he was elected to office with 75 percent of the popular vote, but he was forced by his opponents to flee the country some 16 months later and resettle back in Paris. Iraq's invasion of Iran happened on his watch and augmented his differences with the clerical establishment.

Bazargan, Mehdi (1907–1995) Iran's first post-revolutionary prime minister (1979). A French-educated mechanical engineer, he founded the Liberation Movement of Iran in 1961 and played a crucial role within Islamic intellectual circles before the revolution. He was a deputy minister under Premier Mohammad Mossadeq in the 1950s. He did not have a single cleric in his cabinet and resigned from the premiership after the U.S. Embassy takeover in 1979.

Beheshti, Ayatollah Mohammad (1928–1981) One of Khomeini's most trusted and powerful clerical allies during and immediately after the revolution. Son of an Isfahan cleric, he attended the Qom seminary and earned a doctorate in theology from Tehran University. He served as an Islamic missionary in Germany from 1965 to 1970. He was the secretary-general of the powerful Islamic Republican Party before being killed in a 1981 bombing. Beheshti also presided over the meetings of the Assembly of Experts that drafted the Islamic Republic's constitution and was chief of the judiciary until 1981.

Ebadi, Shirin (1947–) The only Iranian to have received a Nobel Prize. In 1975, she became the first female judge in Iran, but was forced to resign after the revolution. She subsequently opened her own law firm and became a tireless defender of women, children, human rights activists and political prisoners. She was awarded the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize. Her outspoken criticism of the regime after the contested 2009 presidential election forced her into exile.

Ebtekar, Masoumeh (1960–) Iran's first female vice president. Daughter of an engineer, the American-educated activist was known to American television audience as "Sister

Mary,” spokeswoman for the students who took over the U.S. Embassy. Her husband was also one of the hostage takers. After Ebtekar earned a Ph.D. in immunology, President Khatami appointed her vice president and head of the Environmental Protection Organization (1997–2005). President Rouhani [reappointed](#) her to the post in 2013. She represented Iran at the World Women’s Conferences in Nairobi and Beijing.

Ganji, Akbar (1960–) A prominent investigative journalist and dissident. An initial supporter of the Islamic Republic and former member of the Revolutionary Guards, he grew increasingly critical of the regime and played a leading role in exposing the serial killings of Iranian intellectuals. He spent six years in prison (2000–2006) for having attended a “counter-revolutionary” conference in Berlin. To protest his imprisonment, he staged a hunger strike in prison that galvanized public opinion. After his release he settled in the United States, where he writes and criticizes the Iranian regime. He has won several international awards for journalism.

Haddad-Adel, Gholamali (1945–) An influential conservative politician close to the supreme leader. Born into a business family, the former speaker of parliament has advanced degrees in physics and philosophy. After the revolution, he wrote many of the middle school and high school textbooks on religion and social studies. He ran for president in 2013 but withdrew from the race four days before the election. As of 2015, he held a seat in parliament and was also on the Expediency Council. He is the father-in-law of Mojtaba Khamenei, the supreme leader’s son and chief of staff.

Hejazi, Hojatoleslam Ali Asghar (19??–) A powerful yet shadowy cleric who is in charge of security for the office of the supreme leader. He was a deputy in the ministry of intelligence during Khamenei’s presidency in the 1980s. During Khatami’s presidency, he built what the Iranian media referred to as a structure of “parallel intelligence” (*Ettela`at Movazi*) to prosecute regime opponents. In 2013, the U.S. Treasury [sanctioned](#) him for using “his influence behind the scenes to empower elements from Iran’s intelligence services in carrying out violent crackdowns against the Iranian people.” (Hojatoleslam is a clerical rank below ayatollah.)

Jafari, Mohammad-Ali [Aziz] (1957–) Supreme commander of the Revolutionary Guards (2007–). He was reportedly involved in the takeover of the U.S. Embassy and then joined the IRGC in 1981. After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, in which he was badly injured, he earned a master’s degree in architecture. For 13 years (1992–2005), he was the commander of IRGC ground forces. His brother-in-law, Mohammad-Baqer Zolqadr, is also a top commander in the IRGC. Both are on the U.S. government sanctions list.

Jannati, Ayatollah Ahmad (1926–) An arch-conservative cleric who has spent 35 years on the Guardian Council, 30 years on the Assembly of Experts, and 27 years on the Expediency Council. Reelected chairman of the Guardian Council in July 2015, he has held the position since 1992. Born into a clerical family from Isfahan known for

producing good quality quince and pears, he lost a son who had joined the opposition Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization and was killed in a battle with the security forces in 1982. Jannati is a former head of the Iranian Islamic Propagation Organization and served for many years as one of the Friday Prayer Leaders of Tehran. His son, Ali Jannati, was appointed culture minister by President Rouhani in August 2013.

Kadivar, Hojatoleslam Mohsen (1959-) A dissident cleric who rejected the doctrine of clerical rule or *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) espoused by Ayatollah Khomeini. Son of a teacher, he abandoned his study of electrical engineering, which he had started at [Shiraz University](#) before the revolution, in favor of studying theology and jurisprudence at Qom seminary. He became one of the best students of [Ayatollah Montazeri](#) and, like his mentor, became critical of the regime. In 1999, the Special Court for the Clergy sentenced him to an 18-month prison term for his critical views. He left Iran in 2008. Now living in the United States, he remains a fierce critic of the Islamic Republic. He began teaching as a professor of Islamic studies at Duke University in 2009.

Karbaschi, Gholamhoseyn (1953-) Former mayor of Tehran and secretary-general of the Servants of Reconstruction Party (*Hezb-e Kargozaran-e Sazandegi-ye Iran*), which is close to former President Rafsanjani. The son of an ayatollah, he studied theology at Qom Seminary and mathematics at Tehran University. He traded in his clerical robe for civilian clothes and went on to have a successful political career, serving as governor of Isfahan and then mayor of Tehran. In 1998, as a reformist ally of President Khatami, he was arrested on corruption charges and his televised show trial captivated the Iranian public. The court first sentenced him to five years imprisonment for mismanagement of state funds but acquitted him on a bribery charge. The court of appeals later reduced his sentence from five years to two. He became the general secretary of the Executives of Construction Party began managing a reformist newspaper, *Ham-Mihan*, which was shut down twice during Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Karroubi, Hojatoleslam Mehdi (1937-) Former speaker of parliament and later opposition leader. Son of a clergyman from the Lorestan province, he was imprisoned under the shah and became a trusted lieutenant of Khomeini who put him in charge of the Martyrs Foundation (1979-1992) and Pilgrimage Affairs (1985-1990). He was involved in the Iran-Contra negotiations that took place between Iranian and American officials. After serving for 16 years as a member of parliament, often as deputy-speaker or speaker, he ran for president in 2005 and 2009. Both times, he accused the regime of rigging the votes. Karroubi, who was one of the founders of the Assembly of Militant Clerics (*Majma`-e Ruhaniyyun-e Mobarez*), broke with his colleagues over his election protest and in 2005 founded The National Trust Party (*Hezb Etemad Melli*). In 2009, he and Mir-Hossein Mousavi emerged as the two most prominent leaders of the Green Movement. He has been under [house arrest](#) since 2011 for his role in the protests.

Khamenei, Ayatollah Ali (1939–) Succeeded Khomeini as Iran’s supreme leader. Son of a cleric, he was born in Mashhad and studied theology there and in Qom, where he was exposed to Khomeini’s ideas. In the 1980s, he was elected president in 1981 and 1985 during the Iran-Iraq War. In 1989, after Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, the Assembly of Experts selected him to be the supreme leader. Lacking Khomeini’s charisma, he has emerged as a micromanager and has increasingly thrown his considerable weight behind the conservative camp. He survived an assassination attempt in 1981 but lost the use of one of his hands. He has six children.

Khamenei, Hojatoleslam Hadi (1947–) Younger brother of the supreme leader who opposes the concept of *velayat-e faqih*. He is a four-term member of parliament who also published two newspapers (*Jahan Islam* and *Hayat Nou*), both of which were banned by the Judiciary on the charge of castigating political leaders. He [endorsed](#) Hassan Rouhani in the 2013 presidential election.

Khamenei, Hojatoleslam Mojtaba (1969–) Second son of the supreme leader. He is a cleric who both studies and teaches in the Qom seminary. Reputed to be a powerful behind-the-scenes player in his father’s operations and an individual being primed to succeed him, he was the subject of harsh slogans after the 2009 disputed elections with the crowds shouting “Mojtaba, [we hope you] die and never get to be the leader.”

Khatami, Hojatoleslam Mohammad (1943–) Reformist president (1997–2005). Son of an ayatollah, he was born in Yazd province, studied philosophy and theology in university and seminary settings, and married into Khomeini’s family. After the revolution, he held a variety of posts such as administrator of an Islamic Center in Hamburg, head of a government publishing house, member of parliament, and three terms as minister of culture and Islamic guidance. In 1992, he was forced to resign as culture minister after protesting increasing censorship and headed the National Library before respectively winning 69 percent and 77 percent of the vote in the 1997 and 2001 presidential elections. He advocated the concept of “Dialogue of Civilizations” and pursued domestic and foreign policies that somewhat improved Iran’s image during his term in office. In 2015, the Iranian government [banned](#) the media from quoting or mentioning Khatami and prohibited him from traveling outside Iran, a result of his outspoken support of opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. He has three children.

Khoeiniha, Ayatollah Mohammad (1941–) Clerical guide of the students who took over the U.S. Embassy and father of left-wing activism in post-revolutionary Iran. Nicknamed the “Red Mullah” for reportedly having studied at Patrice Lumumba University in the Soviet Union, he has served in such posts as prosecutor general, member of parliament, and member of both the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council. In the 1990s, he was the publisher of the influential *Salam*

newspaper, which was banned after releasing a secret governmental document that led to the student riots in July 1999.

Khomeini, Ayatollah Ruhollah (1902–1989) Charismatic leader of the Islamic Revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic. Born into a clerical family, he grew increasingly critical of the shah's regime, which then sent him into exile in Iraq. He continued his revolutionary activism during 16 years of exile in Najaf, where he articulated the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* as a theory of statecraft. At the age of 73, he witnessed the realization of his dream and deposed one of America's strongest allies in the Middle East. His Shiite followers refer to him as "Imam," an honorific title previously reserved only for the "twelve infallible" descendants of the Prophet.

Khomeini, Hojatoleslam Hassan (1972–) The grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini. He was born in Najaf and presently teaches theology in Qom. He is in charge of the Khomeini mausoleum and has made it clear through his actions and speeches that he supports the reformist camp. Conservatives worry that the reformists may wish to tout him as a potential supreme leader. In late 2015, he seemed to imply that he would run in the 2016 Assembly of Experts election.

Larijani, Ali (1957–) Speaker of parliament and former chief nuclear negotiator. He is the son of Ayatollah Mirza Hashem Amoli and son-in-law of Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari. A student of mathematics and computer science, he also holds advanced degrees in philosophy. After serving in the Revolutionary Guards, he was a member of parliament, minister of culture, member of the Expediency Council, the supreme leader's representative to the Supreme National Security Council, and head of the Iran Broadcasting Corporation.

Larijani, Hojatoleslam Sadegh (1960–) Appointed judiciary chief in 2009. He is the younger clerical brother of Ali Larijani and son-in-law of Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani, a source of emulation in Qom. He earlier served in the Assembly of Experts and the Guardian Council. His reputation suffered due to the regime's harsh treatment of detainees from protests after the 2009 presidential election.

Mahdavi-Kani, Ayatollah Mohammad-Reza (1931–2014) Influential conservative politician who served briefly as a caretaker prime minister in the early years of the revolution. Born into a peasant family, he was sent into internal exile by the shah's regime. After the revolution, he became overseer of the revolutionary committees that mushroomed around the country. His resume includes posts such as minister of interior, secretary-general of the Association of the Militant Clergy (*Jame'eh-ye Ruhaniyyat-e Mobarez*), and chancellor of Imam Sadeq University, as well as member of the Expediency Council, the Guardian Council and Assembly of Experts. In 2011, he was elected chairman of the Assembly of Experts. He passed away in October 2014.

Makarem-Shirazi, Ayatollah Naser (1926–) Powerful ayatollah and source of emulation. Son of a trader, he was born in Shiraz and attended seminary school in Qom. He was jailed and exiled in the pre-[revolutionary](#) period, and he defended more conservative Islamic positions against lay intellectuals like Ali Shariati. After the revolution, he served in the Assembly of Experts that drafted the constitution and then refused to hold other governmental posts. He issued a fatwa objecting to women attending stadiums to watch soccer matches.

Mashaei, Esfandiar Rahim (1960–) One of Ahmadinejad’s closest confidants. Born in Ramsar, his career began with the Revolutionary Guards in that city and then in the Kurdistan region where he fought against Kurdish and Mojahedin-e Khalq forces as an intelligence officer. He subsequently served in both the intelligence and the interior ministries and then joined Ahmadinejad in the Tehran municipality. He served as vice president and head of the Cultural Heritage Organization in Ahmadinejad’s first term and the chief of the Office of the President since 2009. It was rumored that Ahmadinejad wanted to see him as his replacement in the 2013 presidential elections, but the Guardian Council [disqualified](#) him from running. Mashaei’s daughter is married to Ahmadinejad's oldest son.

Mesbah-Yazdi, Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi (1934–) An ultra-conservative senior ayatollah who serves as spiritual guide to many conservative clerics and politicians. Despite being from the same province (Yazd) as Khatami, he and his disciples created constant problems for the former president. Reputed as the only senior ayatollah who kisses the foot of the supreme leader, Mesbah-Yazdi is mentioned as a possible future supreme leader. He also heads the main opposition to Rafsanjani in the Assembly of Experts. Mesbah-Yazdi has been a member of the High Cultural Revolution Council and also heads the Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute. His son-in-law heads the Islamic Propaganda Organization.

Meshkini, Ayatollah Ali-Akbar (1921–2007) Served for 27 years (1980–2007) as the Chairman of the Assembly of Experts. Born into a clerical family from the province of Ardabil, he studied theology in the Qom seminary with Khomeini. He was heavily involved in drafting the land reform legislation after the revolution and served on the central committee of the Association of the Militant Clergy (*Jame`eh-ye Ruhaniyyat-e Mobarez*).

Mirdamadi, Mohsen (1955–) Former hostage-taker and secretary-general of the reformist Islamic Iran Participation Front (*Jebhe-ye Mosharekat-e Iran-e Eslami*). Born in Isfahan, he was one of the three masterminds of the U.S. Embassy takeover. He then joined the Revolutionary Guards and held other positions including governor of Khuzestan and member of the Sixth Parliament. In 2009, he was detained after the disputed presidential election and forced to take part in the show trials that were conducted on television. In 2009, he began serving a [six-year prison sentence](#).

Mohseni-Ejei, Hojatoleslam Gholam Hossein (1957-) Prosecutor general. Son of a cleric from Isfahan, this hard-line and feared cleric has been intimately connected to the intelligence ministry and the judiciary. He was the prosecutor general of the Special Court for the Clergy (1998–2005) before becoming Ahmadinejad’s intelligence minister. Ahmadinejad dismissed him a few months before his term was over, but the head of the judiciary rewarded him with the post of prosecutor general. He was heavily involved in the post-election related arrests and imprisonments in 2009.

Montazeri, Grand Ayatollah Ali (1922–2009) Clerical dissident and former designated heir to the supreme leader (1985–1989). The son of a peasant from the Isfahan province, he studied theology in Qom, served time in prison under the shah, and became one of Khomeini’s chief lieutenants. In the early days of the revolution, he was the target of jokes calling him a simpleton. In November 1985, a consultative council of experts in Islamic jurisprudence appointed him spiritual successor to Ayatollah Khomeini. But his opposition to the mass execution of dissidents in 1988 cost him his position. He spent the rest of his life in Qom under house arrest but continued to speak out against the regime and its human rights record.

Motahhari, Ayatollah Morteza (1920–1979) Leading theologian, political activist and cleric from Khorasan province who was beloved by Khomeini. A professor of Islamic philosophy at Tehran University before the revolution, he emerged as the head of the Council of the Islamic Revolution, a clandestine council appointed by Khomeini to oversee the consolidation of the revolution. His life was cut short a few months after the revolution when he was assassinated by a group of Islamic militants opposed to clerical rule. Khomeini provided his most famous eulogy on the occasion of Motahhari’s death.

Mousavi, Mir Hossein (1942-) Former prime minister and leader of the Green Movement. Son of a tea merchant from East-Azerbaijan, he became an architect by training before the revolution. After the revolution, he joined the Islamic Republic Party and became the chief editor of its newspaper (1979–1980). Because of Mousavi’s left-wing reputation, President Khamenei did not want Mousavi as his prime minister, despite being distant relatives. He introduced Ali Akbar Velayati for the post, yet the parliament did not approve him. Mousavi was then offered the post of prime minister and served in that capacity from 1981 to 1989. He is generally credited with competent management of the country during the course of the Iran-Iraq War. From 1989 to 2009, he served as an advisor to Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami. In 2009, he claimed to have won the presidential election and fiercely contested Ahmadinejad’s official victory. His protest gave rise to the opposition Green Movement. He has been under [house arrest](#) since 2011 for his role in the protests.

Qalibaf, Mohammad-Baqer (1961-) Mayor of Tehran. Son of a dried-fruit seller, he served in the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and quickly moved up the ranks during

and after the Iraq war. A pilot by training, he has held such posts as commander of IRGC's air force, chief of the Law Enforcement Force (2000-05), and since 2005, the mayor of Tehran. He was not on good terms with Ahmadinejad, who prevented him from attending cabinet meetings. He finished [second](#) in the 2013 presidential election.

Rafiqdoust, Mohsen (1940 -) Minister of Revolutionary Guards (1982-1988). He reportedly underwent training in PLO camps before the revolution and started his career as Khomeini's bodyguard. During the 1980s, he became the first and only minister of the IRGC, since the cabinet post was eliminated in 1989. He subsequently headed the Disenfranchised Foundation (*Bonyad Mostazafan*), which he left in 1999 to head the newly formed Noor Foundation. Rafiqdoust refers to himself as the "father of Iran's missile program."

Rafsanjani, Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi (1934-) Former president and speaker of parliament. Born into a farming family from Kerman province, he emerged as one of the most powerful members of the political elite in post-revolutionary Iran. Nicknamed "the shark" since his smooth skinned face does not have a long beard, he has been a mover and shaker in Iranian politics. He served eight years (1989-1997) as president, but on his third try was soundly defeated by Ahmadinejad. He simultaneously heads the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council, despite his declining political fortunes. His family has received widespread criticism for their supposed ill-gotten wealth.

Rahnavard, Zahra (1945-) Writer and political activist. Born into a military family, she attended an art college in the 1960s specializing in sculpture. In 1969, she married Mir Hossein Mousavi and gravitated toward the ideas of Ali Shariati. They spent a few years in the mid-1970s in the United States and went back to Iran at the time of the revolution. She later pursued a doctorate in political science and served as a high-level official at a women's university. She played an active role in her husband's 2009 presidential campaign and helped to galvanize his female supporters. Ahmadinejad's attacks on her personal integrity during the presidential debate with her husband violated a political and social taboo. She has been under house arrest since 2011 for her role in the Green Movement.

Rezaei, Mohsen (1954-) Supreme commander of the Revolutionary Guards (1981-1997). Born in Khuzestan province, he was reportedly involved in a number of assassinations before the revolution and became the IRGC supreme commander at the age of 27. He ran unsuccessfully for the sixth parliament in 1999, and for the presidency in 2005, 2009 and 2013. He presently serves as the secretary of the Expediency Council. INTERPOL issued a warrant for his arrest in 2007 for his involvement in the bombing of the Jewish center in Argentina.

Rouhani, Hassan (1948-) President of Iran (2013-). Born Hassan Feridon into a family living in a small town in Semnan province, he began attending a seminary in the 1960s

and eventually finished clerical training in Qom. He changed his last name from Feridon to Rouhani, which means “spiritual,” when he became a cleric. Rouhani was arrested several times in the 1960s and 1970s for his opposition to the shah. He graduated from the University of Tehran with a law degree in 1972. Rouhani fled Iran in 1977 and joined Ayatollah Khomeini in France in 1978.

Rouhani returned to Iran after the Islamic revolution and served five consecutive terms in parliament from 1980 to 2000. He held high ranking national security positions during the 1980-1988 war with Iraq and afterwards. He was appointed secretary of the Supreme National Security Council in 1989 and held the position under Presidents Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Khatami (1997-2005). Rouhani was also appointed to the Expediency Council in 1991. He earned a doctorate from Glasgow Caledonian University in 1999 for his dissertation on the flexibility of Islamic law.

From 2003 to 2005, Rouhani has acted as lead nuclear negotiator in rounds of diplomacy with European powers and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Hardliners charged that he was too accommodating in negotiations. He resigned after President Ahmadinejad took office in 2005, but continued to head the Expediency Council’s Center for Strategic Research.

In 2013, Rouhani ran for president on platform of prudence, hope and moderation. Competing against a field of mostly conservative candidates and one reformist, he received 51 percent of the vote. As president, his top priorities were to improve Iran’s relations with the international community and to stabilize the economy. On July 14, 2015, Iran reached an agreement on the nuclear issue with the world’s six major powers. Rouhani had less success on the domestic front though, as hardliners blocked his administration’s attempts to open up Iranian society.

Safavi, Yahya Rahim (1952-) Supreme commander of the Revolutionary Guards (1997-2007). Born into a peasant family in Isfahan province, he had military training in Syria before the revolution and served in the shah’s army from 1975 to 1977. Two of his brothers were killed in the Iran-Iraq War. A war veteran himself, he replaced Rezaei as IRGC Commander in 1997. After his term ended, he was appointed by the supreme leader as his military advisor and senior aide for armed forces affairs. He is on the list of Iranian individuals sanctioned by the U.S. government.

Shariati, Ali (1933-1977) Ideologue of the Iranian revolution. Born into a religious family in Mashhad, he received a Ph.D. in hagiology from the University of Paris and subsequently taught Islamic history at Mashhad University. The essays of this prolific author were hugely influential in turning many of Iran’s youth against the shah’s regime. His sudden death from a heart attack significantly contributed to his popularity, as foul play by the shah’s secret service was suspected. Shariati’s anti-

clerical views did not endear him to the class of clerical mandarins who came to power soon after he had passed away.

Shariatmadari, Ayatollah Kazem (1905–1986) A leading traditional Shiite cleric. Born in the Azerbaijan province, he was recognized as a leading ayatollah after the death of Ayatollah Boroujerdi (1875-1961). In 1963, Shariatmadari recognized Ayatollah Khomeini as a grand ayatollah. He played a key role in the Iranian revolution, but soon became a chief critic of the theory of *velayat-e faqih*. In December 1979, he opposed a referendum to centralize power in the hands of the supreme leader, a position that cost him his religious authority. The government accused him of being an accomplice in a plot to kill Khomeini, and they stripped him of his clerical robe. He lived the last six years of his life under house arrest until he passed away in 1986.

Soleimani, Qassem (19??-) Commander of Revolutionary Guards' Qods Forces, the elite unit that carries out foreign operations. A decorated veteran of the Iran-Iraq War whom Khamenei has referred to as a "living martyr," he was one of the 24 IRGC commanders who wrote a threatening letter to President Khatami in 1999. He is reportedly heavily involved in Iran's activities in Iraq and Syria. In 2014 and 2015, the media published many photographs of him on the frontlines in the fight against ISIS and other militants in both countries.

Soroush, Abdolkarim (1945-) A leading Islamic thinker. Trained in pharmacy and the philosophy of science, he was a theoretician of the Islamic Republic in its early days and was appointed by Khomeini as a member of the Supreme Council for the Cultural Revolution. He increasingly grew critical of the regime and served as an intellectual mentor to young Islamic intellectuals disassociating themselves from the regime. In the 1990s, he was considered the father of the reform movement, which led to frequent attacks on his lectures. He presently resides in the United States.

Velayati, Ali-Akbar (1945-) Iran's foreign minister (1981–1997). A pediatrician who had advanced training at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Velayati served as foreign minister under Khamenei and Rafsanjani. After leaving office, he became a foreign policy advisor to the supreme leader. In 2013, he ran unsuccessfully for the presidency. He has served as head of the Expediency Council's Strategic Research Center since 2013.

Yazdi, Ebrahim (1931-) Former foreign minister and secretary-general of the Liberation Movement of Iran (*Nehzat Azadi*). American-educated, he has a doctorate in pharmacy and was active in the overseas Iranian opposition movement against the shah. He served as one of Khomeini's closest confidants, spokesmen and translators during the ayatollah's stay in Paris (1978-1979). After serving briefly as Bazargan's foreign minister and then one term as a member of parliament, he was shunned politically. He remained

active as an opposition politician; he has been jailed several times. In 2011, he was [sentenced](#) to eight years in prison and five years' ban on social activities.

Yazdi, Ayatollah Mohammad (1921-) An arch-conservative cleric from Isfahan. He is one of the record holders in post-revolutionary Iran in terms of important positions occupied. Among his titles are head of Khomeini's Office in Qom, head of the Revolutionary Court in Qom, judiciary chief, and he spent many years in parliament, the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts and Expediency Council.

Zarif, Mohammad Javad (1960-) Foreign minister (2013-). Widely regarded as one of Iran's most savvy diplomats, Zarif speaks English with an American accent after receiving two degrees from San Francisco State University and a doctorate in international relations from the University of Denver. Zarif served as deputy U.N. ambassador from 1989 to 1992 and then as deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs until 2002. Zarif was involved in both formal and informal talks with the United States. In 2001, he was Iran's emissary to U.N. talks on the future of Afghanistan after the Taliban's ouster. U.S. envoy James Dobbins credited Zarif with preventing the collapse of the conference due to last-minute demands by the Northern Alliance to control the new government. As an ambassador to the United Nations from 2002 to 2007, Zarif attempted to improve relations with the West, including the United States.

In 2013, President Rouhani appointed Zarif foreign minister. He played a pivotal role in the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the world's six major powers. After talks began in late 2013, he frequently met one-on-one with Secretary of State John Kerry. The direct dialogue was a major reversal after three decades of tension with the United States. After some 20 months of difficult and intense negotiations, Iran and the so-called P5+1 – Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States – reached a landmark nuclear deal on July 14, 2015.

This chapter was originally published in 2010, and is updated as of December 2015.