

Governing in the Name of the Hidden Imam: The Political Theology of the Islamic Republic and the Case Against Tehran

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Summary

Western policy toward the Middle East has spent two decades treating the Islamic Republic of Iran as a state actor whose behavior can be explained the way any state's behavior is explained — through interest, deterrence, and the ordinary calculus of regime survival. That framework is not wrong so much as radically incomplete. The Islamic Republic is the only state in the modern world whose founding constitutional doctrine holds that legitimate government exists only because a divinely appointed Imam has gone into hiding, and that a jurist may rule in his place until he returns. That doctrine — *velayat-e faqih*, the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist — is not a rhetorical flourish layered onto an otherwise ordinary authoritarian state. It is the operating system. This essay argues that the distinctive danger of the Islamic Republic lies precisely here, in the fusion of Twelver Shia messianism, a martyrdom doctrine that inverts the ordinary cost-calculus of war, and a documented pattern — now visible across two successive successions — of manufacturing religious authority to legitimate political power. It further argues that this is a problem with Khomeinism, the specific 1979 political theology invented by Ruhollah Khomeini and inherited, awkwardly, by his successors, and not a problem with Shia Islam as practiced by the roughly 200 million Shia Muslims who live under no such doctrine and, in the tradition's own most influential quietist school, explicitly reject it. The case for isolating and ultimately displacing the Tehran regime is strongest when it rests on this distinction rather than blurring past it.

I. A War the Cameras Could Not Film

When Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed in the joint US-Israeli strikes of 28 February 2026, most Western coverage treated the event as a decapitation strike against a head of state — the kind of thing that produces a power vacuum, a succession crisis, a reshuffling of alliances. All of that followed. But it missed the deeper fracture, which was theological rather than political. Khamenei's authority did not rest on election, and it did not rest on the ordinary machinery of a security state alone. It rested on the claim that the Twelfth

Imam, in occultation since the ninth century and, in Twelver doctrine, still alive and still destined to return, had left behind a jurist qualified to govern in his absence. Strike the man occupying that office and you do not just create a vacancy. You reopen a question Shia political theology spent a thousand years trying not to answer: whether the guardianship of a hidden Imam can be exercised by anyone at all.

This is why the succession that followed was so revealing. Iran's constitution requires the Supreme Leader to hold recognized standing as a senior religious authority. Mojtaba Khamenei, installed after a chaotic Assembly of Experts vote conducted under Israeli bombardment, does not hold the rank of ayatollah. Assembly members who opposed his elevation said so explicitly, warning that a Vali-ye Faqih without established clerical and jurisprudential standing would lack religious legitimacy. That objection is not incidental. It is the same objection Grand Ayatollah Montazeri raised against the elder Khamenei decades earlier — that the office requires theological credentials the occupant does not have. Two successions, one complaint, unresolved both times by force rather than argument. The Islamic Republic has now twice solved a theological legitimacy problem with an Assembly of Experts vote conducted under duress, which is a way of saying it has not solved it at all.

II. Death as Currency

Western strategic culture treats casualties as a cost to be minimized. This assumption is so deeply built into deterrence theory that it rarely gets named as an assumption — it simply is how loss gets counted. The martyrdom framework that underwrites the Islamic Republic's proxy network operates on an entirely different level. Death is not a cost. It's a currency. Martyrdom is not a failure. It's a fulfillment. A soldier who dies for the cause of divine justice does not represent a subtraction from the movement's strength. He represents the investment, the escalation of sacred commitment, a down payment on ultimate victory. The blood of the martyrs does not weaken the movement. According to this framework, it waters it. It's not a metaphor. It's an operational theology.

This is not a rhetorical flourish either — it is load-bearing doctrine that has shaped the design of the IRGC's entire regional posture: Hezbollah's willingness to absorb catastrophic losses and describe them as victories, the Houthi movement's targeting doctrine, the recruitment logic of Shia militias in Iraq. A deterrence model built for actors who treat casualties as costs will consistently misjudge actors who treat casualties as an accumulating asset. This is a genuine, underappreciated intelligence failure, and it recurs precisely because the framework doing the misjudging is secular and the framework being misjudged is not.

III. Two Generations of a Fabricated Mandate

For more than twenty years, Western diplomats treated a Khamenei "fatwa" against nuclear weapons as a load-bearing fact — cited by American presidents, built into the assumptions underneath the JCPOA. No written text of it has ever surfaced. The most authoritative scholarly defense of its existence — a 2022 book by Shameer Modongal and Seyed Hossein Mousavian — concedes on its own page 69 that no written fatwa exists and falls back on the claim that an oral pronouncement suffices. Hassan Rouhani, who introduced the fatwa into diplomacy during 2004 talks with European foreign ministers, later admitted the idea struck him in the room, with no advance coordination. Montazeri, once Khomeini's designated successor, said flatly of Khamenei: "He is not at the level of religious authority; he has no right to issue a fatwa." And Iranian officials have, at various points, said openly that the fatwa is revocable in response to "developing circumstances" — which is to say, it was never the unconditional constraint it was sold as.

What matters for the present argument is less the fatwa's falseness than the *pattern* it establishes, and that pattern has now repeated with the son. Religious authority is manufactured when the regime needs it and treated as negotiable when the regime's survival requires flexibility — the constitutional doctrine of *maslahat-e nezam*, regime expediency, makes this explicit: the survival of the Islamic Republic overrides ordinary religious rulings, by design, since 1989. A jurist without a fatwa's paper trail became, for two decades, the guarantor of Iran's nuclear restraint. A cleric without an ayatollah's rank has now become the guarantor of the hidden Imam's guardianship. Both are theological credentials invented to fit a political requirement, not political power flowing from an antecedent theological credential. This is the opposite of principled religious government. It is religious government's simulation, assembled after the fact.

IV. Sigheh, Umar, and the Logic of Exclusive Authority

It would be easy to read Shia jurisprudence's treatment of temporary marriage — *Sigheh*, or *Mut'ah* — as an isolated curiosity: a doctrinal dispute over whether the Prophet's permission for contract marriage was ever legitimately revoked. Sunni schools hold that Muhammad forbade it permanently, citing his declaration at the Farewell Pilgrimage. Shia jurisprudence holds that the second Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, banned it on his own authority decades later — and that a Caliph has no standing to override a practice God and His Messenger had sanctioned. Shias take Umar's own recorded words — "I forbid them both and will punish anyone who practices them" — as an admission of exactly this: a human ruler amending divine law.

The interesting move is not that Shia jurisprudence resists the ban. It is *why* it resists the ban, and the *why* is not conservatism about marriage law at all. It is a claim about the exclusive location of legitimate religious-legal authority: only the Prophet and, in Twelver doctrine, the Imams who succeeded him can amend what God and His Messenger

established. No caliph, no parliament, no secular constitution can do it. That is precisely the same jurisprudential claim that, extended from the household to the state, produces velayat-e faqih. If a Caliph lacks the standing to end a marriage practice, then a fortiori a republic lacks the standing to override the rulings of the jurist governing in the Imam's place. The Sigheh dispute and the constitutional architecture of the Islamic Republic are not two unrelated facts about Shia tradition. They share a single premise about where lawful authority resides, and that premise is what makes the Iranian state's legal order resistant to ordinary constitutional correction from below.

V. Two Roads Through Islam: Conquest, Commerce, and Kuala Lumpur

It is worth remembering that this fusion of eschatology and coercive political authority was never the only available outcome for Islamic expansion. The historiography of Islam's spread into Southeast Asia is comparatively well established: Indonesia and Malaysia became Muslim-majority societies not through conquest but through centuries of Arab, Indian, and Chinese Muslim merchants trading along the Malacca Strait, with conversion following commercial and social contact rather than the sword. Whatever one thinks of early Islamic expansion in the seventh and eighth centuries, the thirteenth-through-sixteenth-century Islamization of the Malay archipelago looked much more like the slow diffusion of a trading culture than like a martyrdom doctrine exported at the point of a spear. That matters here because it demonstrates that an eschatological, coercive political theology is not an inevitable feature of Islamic religiosity — it is a specific, contingent development, one Khomeini invented in 1970 and installed by revolution in 1979, not a default setting the tradition was always going to arrive at.

Malaysia's own record on Shia Islam complicates any simple contrast, and honesty requires holding both halves of it. In 1996, Malaysia's National Fatwa Council declared Shia teaching "deviant" and banned its propagation; the ban is now enforced in eleven of Malaysia's fourteen states, and officials have defended it in explicitly security-coded language — the head of Malaysia's Islamic Development Department once called Shiism "a cancer that needs to be prevented from spreading," and a state mufti warned of a movement to turn the country into a "mullah state," an explicit reference to Tehran. That is a real data point for the argument that some Sunni-majority states view Khomeinist-style clerical absolutism as an imported security threat rather than a private confessional difference. But it is not the whole picture: Malaysia's Shia population is estimated at perhaps 200,000 people in a country of 28 million, none of them linked to domestic terrorism, and international human rights bodies have criticized the ban — enforced through raids, arrests, and in at least one documented case a still-unexplained disappearance — as discriminatory treatment of a small, largely apolitical minority rather than a proportionate security response. Tellingly, some of Malaysia's Shia community has adopted the classical, defensive form of taqiyya — concealing belief to avoid persecution — which is the original sense of the doctrine discussed above: a shield for a minority under threat, not a weapon wielded by a state. The

lesson is not that Sunni-majority Malaysia got its answer right. It is that even a state prepared to name Khomeinism as a threat has, in practice, applied that judgment indiscriminately to ordinary believers who present no such threat at all — which is exactly the mistake this essay is trying to avoid making at civilizational scale.

VI. The Abraham Accords and the Case Against Tehran

The casual observer of the current diplomatic moment could be forgiven for hoping that a negotiated settlement between Washington and whatever government now sits in Tehran would produce durable regional peace. It would not. The durable strategic logic points the other way: the long-term stabilization of the Middle East runs through the diminishment, not the accommodation, of Khomeinist political authority in Tehran, whoever currently holds it. The Abraham Accords, and the broader normalization track connecting Israel to Gulf and North African Sunni-majority states, represent a competing model of regional order — one organized around trade, energy integration, and the ordinary machinery of interstate cooperation rather than around a martyrdom doctrine that treats confrontation as spiritually generative. Riyadh's own cautious opening toward Israel, the UAE's and Bahrain's normalization, and the consistent signaling from Gulf states that they view Iranian-backed militias as the primary regional destabilizer, all point toward a Sunni-majority political consensus that commerce, not eschatology, should organize the region's future. Mojtaba Khamenei's own first message as Supreme Leader — delivered not in person but read by a state announcer over a still photograph, promising continued resistance and revenge — suggests a leadership more committed to extending the martyrdom framework than to testing any alternative to it.

VII. What This Argument Does Not Claim

It does not claim that Shia Islam as such is a threat to global order. The tradition's most influential quietist school, centered on Najaf and associated today with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, explicitly rejects Khomeini's claim that a jurist should exercise direct political rule in the Imam's absence — which means the strongest theological rebuttal to *velayat-e faqih* comes from within Shia jurisprudence itself, not from outside it. Most of the world's Shia Muslims, in Iraq, Lebanon, India, and elsewhere, live under no such doctrine and have no stake in Tehran's export of it. Nor does this argument claim that Sunni Islam is free of comparable dangers — Salafi-jihadist movements, from al-Qaeda to the Islamic State, have produced a body count and a doctrine of sanctified violence that rivals anything discussed here, and mainstream Sunni jurisprudence's own instrumental tolerance for lying in the service of a permissible goal, codified in the classical manual *Reliance of the Traveller*, deserves exactly the same scrutiny this essay has applied to *taqiyya*. And it does not claim that regime change is a low-risk undertaking; Iraq and Libya are sufficient warning that toppling a state is far easier than building a stable one to replace it, and that outcome is a live risk in Iran regardless of how compelling the theological case against Tehran's current government may be. What the argument does claim is narrower and, I think, more

defensible: that a specific, invented, twice-manufactured political theology — not a fourteen-century-old faith tradition — is what makes Tehran different in kind from its neighbors, and that the West's twenty-year habit of mistaking that theology's political utterances for genuine religious restraint has been a consistent and expensive error.

Conclusion

The fabricated fatwa and the fabricated moderate were never really two different problems. They were the same operation performed twice on the same audience: an invented credential offered to a West that wanted, very badly, a reason to believe accommodation was possible. Mojtaba Khamenei's contested elevation suggests the operation is now running a third time, on a domestic audience this time, with even thinner theological material to work with. None of this indicts the faith of the roughly 200 million Shia Muslims who never signed on to Khomeini's 1970 innovation and, in the tradition's own leading quietist school, actively oppose it. It indicts a regime that has spent two generations treating religious authority as a resource to be manufactured rather than a constraint to be obeyed — and a Western foreign policy establishment that kept mistaking the manufacturing for the real thing.

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