

## **A Window into the Foreign Policy of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei**

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### **KEY FINDINGS**

- Both Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, the regime's founder, and the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have used personal envoys and trusted agents to conduct a parallel foreign policy outside the confines of the foreign ministry and beyond the oversight of the executive branch.
- Assessing the rhetoric and actions of the Supreme Leader's senior advisor for international affairs, Ali Akbar Velayati, provides a valuable window into the attitudes and priorities of the Supreme Leader himself.
- The nature of Velayati's personal relationship with Iran's Supreme Leader is unknown. Khamenei has appointed Velayati to several high-profile, sensitive positions. Khamenei has also kept Velayati as his own personal advisor, and used him to conduct sensitive diplomatic efforts on his behalf. We can conclude with moderately high confidence, therefore, that Velayati is a trusted associate of the Supreme Leader.
- Velayati's direct appointments to diplomatic and informal or quasi-governmental public diplomacy positions outside the purview of Iran's foreign ministry suggest that Khamenei has carved out a role for his trusted senior advisor to help supervise and coordinate his parallel foreign policy.
- Velayati appears to owe his position and influence almost entirely to Khamenei's patronage and cannot, therefore, deviate from the Supreme Leader, let alone confront him. Consequently, Velayati's behavior and statements acquire potentially greater significance from the likelihood that they reflect his best understanding of the Supreme Leader's attitudes and desires.
- Velayati has consistently shown commitment to advancing Iran's position as vanguard of the Islamic Revolution and protector of Muslims, Palestinians in particular. He has also steadfastly opposed rapprochement with the United States. Both of these positions reflect fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic's politico-ideology and revolutionary foreign policy as the Supreme Leader himself expresses it.
- Velayati's position as senior advisor to the Supreme Leader for foreign affairs, his seat on Khamenei's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations and his consistent public support for Khamenei's hardline views indicate that he plays a role in the Supreme Leader's foreign policy efforts. His diplomatic activity during his tenure as advisor to the Supreme Leader suggests that he is more than a mouthpiece and, in fact, is actively engaged in the implementation of Khamenei's foreign policy, although the extent of his influence remains unclear.

- Heads of state use personal envoys in addition to formal diplomatic structures periodically. There is nothing, therefore, inherently odd about Velayati's continued involvement in Iranian diplomacy after his removal from power at the foreign ministry. Its significance, rather, is two-fold. First, it is a piece of evidence that can help clarify the role that the Supreme Leader actually plays in Iranian foreign policy, since Velayati is so clearly reporting directly to—and messaging directly from—Khamenei rather than from the president. Second, it provides a glimpse of the kind of messaging that those most dependent on, and presumably devoted to, the Supreme Leader feel that he wants to hear. That glimpse is not reassuring.

## INTRODUCTION

On February 8, 2007, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki met with his Indian counterpart in Tehran to negotiate a long-term natural gas agreement between the two countries.<sup>1</sup> That same day, Ali Akbar Velayati, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei's senior advisor for international affairs, met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov to discuss Iran's nuclear program. The meeting between Velayati and Russian officials occurred at a particularly sensitive time—one month after Iran had barred International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors from entering the country, and two weeks before the United Nations (UN) Security Council's deadline for Iran to cease its enrichment activities.<sup>2</sup> Although the foreign minister's meeting with Indian officials was important for Iran's national interest, Velayati's mission was clearly more important and more sensitive.

This juxtaposition of the activities of Iran's formal and informal foreign policy leadership illustrates the complexity of Iranian diplomacy. Both Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, the regime's founder, and the current Supreme Leader have used personal envoys and trusted agents to conduct a parallel foreign policy outside the confines of the foreign ministry and beyond the oversight of the executive branch. Perhaps the most direct and dramatic statement of this fact came in 2008 when Quds Force commander Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani—who reports directly to Iran's Supreme Leader— informed General David Petraeus that “I [Suleimani]...control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan.”<sup>3</sup>

The Supreme Leader's personal agents do not necessarily pursue agendas very different from those of the formal foreign policy organs, although there have been a few notable occasions when they did, as we shall see. But their very existence and persistence, as well as the confidence with which they continue to speak and act on behalf of the Supreme Leader, tells us a great deal about how the Iranian government is actually functioning and the role that the Supreme Leader still plays in making and executing policy.

Ali Akbar Velayati served as Iran's foreign minister for sixteen years before becoming senior advisor to the Supreme Leader in 1997. In this role, Velayati has been at the fore, at least publicly, of several of the Islamic Republic's critical diplomatic ventures. His rhetoric has remained consistently hardline, but always in tune with the Supreme Leaders'—and when Iran's presidents have disagreed with the Supreme Leader, Velayati has always remained loyal to his patron rather than to the formal structures of the state. Velayati's rhetoric and actions provide a valuable window into the attitudes and priorities of the Supreme Leader himself.

## **WHO IS ALI AKBAR VELAYATI?**

Velayati was born June 25, 1945 in northern Tehran.<sup>4</sup> A physician by trade, he received degrees in medicine and pediatric medicine from the University of Tehran in 1971 and 1974. In 1976, Velayati traveled to the United States to study at Johns Hopkins University, where he completed a post-graduate program specializing in children's infectious disease.<sup>5</sup> It is not entirely clear at what point Velayati was radicalized; however, his personal biography and other open-source materials provide some insight into his early political activity. In 1962, he became involved with Iran's Second National Front (SNF), a nationalist group active in Iran from 1960 to 1963 and opposed to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.<sup>6</sup> Velayati claims to have been tortured and interrogated for his oppositional activities on more than one occasion by the Shah's notorious internal security agency, SAVAK.<sup>7</sup> Velayati quickly distanced himself from the SNF, however, preferring to form an "exclusive" relationship with the clerics and religious activists.<sup>8</sup> It was during this same period that he became an adherent of "the line of the Imam," the revolutionary politico-ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>9</sup> In 1963, he co-founded the Islamic Association of Tehran University's medical college.<sup>10</sup> While studying in the United States, Velayati joined the Muslim Students Association, an organization founded by members of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1963 with the stated goal of "spreading Islam as students of North America."<sup>11</sup> Velayati joined the Islamic Association of Engineers in 1971, and according to his account, attended the organization's meetings in the presence of future prominent leaders of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, such as Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti, Ayatollah Mousavi Ardebili, and Ayatollah Morteza Motahari.<sup>12</sup> At some point before the revolution, he became involved with the Hojjatiyeh Charitable Organization, a secretive politico-religious organization that Khomeini banned in 1983.<sup>13</sup> Velayati renounced his affiliation with Hojjatiyeh that same year.

In the revolution's earliest years, Velayati occupied various mid-level government posts including educational director of the Ministry of Health, Deputy Minister of Health, and a member of parliament for Tehran before becoming foreign minister in 1981.<sup>14</sup> He claims to have joined the Islamic Republican Party, a political coalition of Khomeini supporters, in 1979 and later co-founded its Doctors' Association.<sup>15</sup> The near-total absence of evidence about his involvement in the Iran-Iraq War suggests that his role in the war was extremely limited. Velayati participated in talks in Moscow on February 14, 1987 and negotiated on Iran's behalf at the UN following the signing of UN Security Council Resolution 598 in 1987, but there is no evidence suggesting that he had connections with commanders in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) or regular forces, or that he was involved in operational planning during this period.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that Velayati ever developed strong relationships within the IRGC or Iran's other security agencies.

### **Timeline of Velayati's positions in the Iranian regime**

1979 – 1980: Educational Director, Ministry of Health; Deputy Minister of Health; Member of Parliament for Tehran

1981 – 1997: Foreign Minister

1989 – present: Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution

1997 – present: Senior advisor to the Supreme Leader on foreign affairs

1997 – present: Member, Expediency Council

1999 – 2002: Secretary General, Ahlul Bayt World Assembly

2006 – present: Member, Strategic Council on Foreign Relations

2007 – present: Member, Azad University Board of Trustees

2009: Member, special committee formed by the Guardian Council to investigate grievances stemming from the 2009 presidential elections

2011 – present: Secretary General, Islamic Awakening Conference

The composition and nature of Velayati's personal network outside Iran's military establishment is equally unclear. He has held a number of high-profile positions in some of the Islamic Republic's most powerful institutions, yet there is no pattern of membership within these organizations to indicate that he has retained his prominent position or attained his current position through a specific network of individuals. His failure to play a prominent or courageous role in the Iran-Iraq War—the crucible moment of Iran's leaders today—and his absence from public discussion on the ousting of Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri from the regime's ranks—another key moment in the revolution's formative years—suggests that he may not have had an independent base of support that would allow him to form or manipulate policy. His relative weakness is also suggested by the fact that he was mentioned as a potential conservative presidential candidate in 2001, 2005, and 2009 but proved unable to muster enough support to make a serious bid in any of those elections. This is not to say that Velayati is not a trusted official within the regime or that he does not exercise some influence, but, rather, that his ability to wield power as an individual is limited and he does not appear to have an extensive personal network of other powerful individuals.<sup>17</sup>

#### **VELAYATI'S RELATIONSHIP WITH KHAMENEI**

The nature of Velayati's personal relationship with Iran's Supreme Leader is unknown. Khamenei has appointed Velayati to several high-profile, sensitive positions. Khamenei has also kept Velayati as his own personal advisor, and used him to conduct sensitive diplomatic efforts on his behalf. We can conclude with moderately high confidence, therefore, that Velayati is a trusted associate of the Supreme Leader. The first indication that Khamenei had placed some measure of trust in Velayati came in 1981 when Khamenei, then serving as Iran's first president, proposed Velayati as prime minister. During this period, members of the leftist faction of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) who aspired to impose a command economy dominated Iran's parliament. They confronted members of the IRP's rightist faction—including Khamenei and future president Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani—who favored an economic structure more palatable to the private sector.<sup>18</sup> In an effort to prevent further gains by the rightist faction, the leftists denounced Velayati's conservative views and prevented him from taking office. Velayati was instead appointed Iran's foreign minister, a position he retained for sixteen years, through Mir-Hossein Mousavi's eight years as prime minister—during which Khamenei was president—and the two-term presidency of Rafsanjani.<sup>19</sup>

After Hojjat al-Eslam Mohammad Khatami became president in 1997, he removed Velayati from his cabinet post and appointed Kamal Kharrazi as foreign minister, a move that Iran's conservative press and Velayati himself fought vigorously. Immediately following Khatami's decision, Ayatollah Khamenei appointed Velayati as his senior advisor on international affairs.<sup>20</sup> Khamenei praised Velayati's "fruitful and proud period" as Iran's foreign minister and explained that he had chosen Velayati so that he could "better exploit [his] wealth of experience."<sup>21</sup>

Two years after Khamenei had made Velayati his personal advisor on foreign affairs, he selected Velayati to become the secretary general of the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly (ABWA). According to an interview with Hojjat al-Eslam ‘Ali Taskhiri, Velayati’s predecessor at ABWA, this organization actively seeks to gain supremacy “over all Islamic groups active in the areas of culture, propaganda, economics, society, and politics via peaceful propaganda and persuasion, and to implement the Iranian claim to leadership over all Shi’i communities in the world.”<sup>22</sup> ABWA is a component of the Supreme Leader’s propaganda network and an extension of Iran’s systematic efforts to exert soft power regionally and beyond. ABWA describes the secretary general as responsible for “manag[ing] and implement[ing] policies and programs adopted by the assembly.”<sup>23</sup> That Khamenei selected Velayati to lead this organization suggests that the Supreme Leader trusted his advisor to ensure that ABWA’s operations were aligned with his diplomatic agenda. Velayati led the organization until 2002, when he was replaced by Ayatollah Mohammad Mehdi Asefi.<sup>24</sup>

In 2006, Khamenei appointed Velayati to a newly-formed foreign policy commission known as the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (SCFR). Though the SCFR’s precise role is unclear, its remit seems to extend beyond general counsel and includes strategic planning, according to the Supreme Leader’s decree establishing it: “It is necessary that the [SCFR] should be formed to help global decision-making, and to seek new horizons and scopes in foreign relations of the Islamic Republic.”<sup>25</sup> The creation of the SCFR as a parallel diplomatic organization under the control of the Supreme Leader, as well as its broad policy mandate, aligns with Khamenei’s previous efforts to counter the executive branch’s authority in the diplomatic sphere after Khatami’s electoral victory and efforts to shift Iran’s foreign policy away from conflict with the West. The individual appointed to head this organization, Kamal Kharrazi, articulated this point unequivocally: “The Supreme Leader sensed such a deficiency in the policy-making process a long time ago.... Given such a deficiency of lack of strategy in foreign relations [he] decided to establish such a council.... All foreign relations issues on a strategic level are within the framework of the responsibility of the [SCFR] and it has nothing to do with executive matters.”<sup>26</sup> President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s spokesperson, Gholam-Hossein Elham, attempted to downplay the significance of the SCFR by telling reporters within twenty-four hours of its creation that the SCFR had “no executive and practical duties,” suggesting that the president was acutely aware of the Supreme Leader’s intentions.<sup>27</sup> Velayati’s appointment to the SCFR is yet another indication that Khamenei trusts his advisor to represent his views accurately at the highest levels.

Following the unrest that accompanied Iran’s contentious 2009 presidential elections, the Guardian Council formed a “special committee” to investigate the grievances of discontented Iranians in an attempt to legitimate its forthcoming confirmation of the election results.<sup>28</sup> Velayati was appointed to this committee alongside others closely linked to the Supreme Leader, including Khamenei’s representative to the Martyrs’ Foundation, Mohammad-Hassan Rahimian, and the father-in-law of one of Khamenei’s sons, former parliamentary speaker Gholam-Ali Hadad Adel.<sup>29</sup> The Supreme Leader has overwhelming influence on the composition of the Guardian Council and, therefore, its selections can be seen as representative of his desires to a considerable extent. Velayati’s inclusion on a committee composed of several ardent Khamenei supporters tasked with legitimizing a contested election result that had implications for Khamenei’s own legitimacy—and that he would later confirm—provides further evidence of the trust Khamenei places in his advisor for international affairs. Velayati has held several other powerful posts in the Islamic Republic, including membership of the board of the Imam Reza

Foundation (estimated to be the third largest economic organization in Iran); the Expediency Council; the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, and; the board of trustees of Azad University.<sup>30</sup>

Considered cumulatively, Velayati's direct appointments to diplomatic and informal or quasi-governmental public diplomacy positions outside the purview of Iran's foreign ministry suggest that Khamenei has carved out a role for his trusted senior advisor to help supervise and coordinate his parallel foreign policy. Since Velayati does not appear to have a significant base of independent support or a well-established network within the regime, unlike other powerful individuals in the Islamic Republic who report directly to Khamenei, such as Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani, the logical question is what value does Velayati bring to the Supreme Leader? It may be that Velayati's lack of any visible personal power base makes him a reliable tool for the Supreme Leader. Velayati appears to owe his position and influence almost entirely to Khamenei's patronage and cannot, therefore, deviate from the Supreme Leader, let alone confront him. Consequently, Velayati's behavior and statements acquire potentially greater significance from the likelihood that they reflect his best understanding of the Supreme Leader's attitudes and desires.

### **THE MOUTHPIECE OF KHAMENEI'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Velayati has consistently shown commitment to advancing Iran's position as vanguard of the Islamic Revolution and protector of the Muslim world, Palestine in particular. He has also steadfastly opposed rapprochement with the United States. Both of these positions reflect fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic's politico-ideology and revolutionary foreign policy as the Supreme Leader himself expresses it. Other Iranian leaders have at times disputed the Islamic Republic's hostility toward the West, but Velayati's rhetoric has consistently followed Khamenei's hard line on this issue.

Khamenei often discusses the Islamic Republic's role in the Muslim world as a whole and not just within the Shi'a community. Comments he made in 2007 are typical of this line: "The Iranian nation has named this year as the year of Islamic solidarity. This naming was used due to the awareness of the intensified plots hatched in order to sow the seeds of discord among our brothers.... The future belongs to the Muslim Ummah and each and every one of us may contribute to the nearness of that future proportionate to the amount of responsibility or capability we have."<sup>31</sup> Velayati's commitment to this line of rhetoric is long-established. In June 1998, Velayati warned of the dangers posed by "ideological confrontation" against the Islamic Republic and declaimed, "All the sympathetic and sincere forces of the revolution, particularly the clergy, are duty-bound to safeguard the values of Islam and the revolution."<sup>32</sup> Referring to the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon, Velayati asserted that Iran's objective is "to awaken Muslims" across the globe, whether Sunni or Shi'a.<sup>33</sup> Addressing a gathering of students at Imam Reza University later that same year, Velayati connected Iran's self-perception as guardian of the Islamic world to its foreign policy: "The Islamic Republic's system must be independent within the field of international relations and its effectiveness, proven among nations, must link the Iranian spirit and Islamic religious culture for all people."<sup>34</sup> This statement is consistent with remarks made in 1995, in which the foreign minister described Iran's foreign policy as "based on defending the interests of Islam and Iran."<sup>35</sup> Likewise, in 1996 Velayati said that it was Iran's duty to defend Muslims across the globe, and Iran would not hesitate "to defend Islam, Iran, and Islamic values."<sup>36</sup>

Velayati's commitment to the Islamic Republic's revolutionary foreign policy is most clearly reflected in his vocal support for Palestinian resistance and enmity with the United States. During a conference on

Palestine organized in Tehran in 2003, Velayati expressed the most radical component of Iran's support for Palestinian resistance when he asserted that "unity in the Islamic world...will not materialize unless Israel is removed."<sup>37</sup> At the same conference, Velayati attempted to bolster Iran's Islamic vanguard image by linking it to the plight of Palestinians: "The issue of Palestine is of interest to the entire Islamic world, especially Arab countries. Therefore, we must know that despite the common ground between us, the Arab world will not be able to overcome tumultuous waves without us."<sup>38</sup> One month prior to these remarks, Khamenei framed Iran's support for Palestinian resistance similarly: "Defense of Palestine is not defense of a country or a nation. It is an attempt to solve a main problem of the Islamic World and Arab countries." Addressing a gathering of Shi'a and Sunni Afghan scholars in 2005, Velayati warned against U.S. "hegemony in the world" and "her objective...to remove Islam from [Palestine]...the heart of the Islamic world."<sup>39</sup> Velayati added, "The intifada of Palestine has forced the Zionists to their knees and... today the Muslim Palestinians have the initiative."<sup>40</sup> That same year, Khamenei celebrated Palestinian resistance, stressing that "continuation and strengthening of resistance and jihad is the only way to encounter the Zionist enemy... Resistance should be continued by the Palestinian nation...in cooperation with jihadi groups."<sup>41</sup> Two years later, Velayati criticized U.S. support for Israel and praised the "alert Palestinians...ready for resistance to the last drop of their pure bloods."<sup>42</sup> Further underscoring Iran's desire to be a leading voice on the issue, Velayati noted in 2009, "The problems of the people of Palestine are not the business of just one specific country and the Arab states are not the spokesmen for the Palestinian people in any way."<sup>43</sup> Speaking at the 2011 Islamic Awakening Conference in Tehran—a conference for which Velayati was appointed Secretary General by the Supreme Leader—Khamenei stressed the need for "a unified Islamic Ummah and the creation of a new Islamic civilization," stating that "the liberation of Palestine from the savage claws of the Zionists is... a great objective."<sup>44</sup> Velayati also told the conference: "Palestine and resistance, as the main issue of the Islamic World, has turned into a pillar of the Islamic Awakening."<sup>45</sup>

These examples show the consonance between the views of Iran's Supreme Leader and his senior advisor for foreign affairs on the issue of Palestinian resistance. But support for Palestinian resistance is an issue that nearly all of the Islamic Republic's elite agree upon—though some, such as Khamenei and his deputies, support it more zealously than others. Enmity toward the United States has also been a principal of Iran's hardline foreign policy from the earliest days of Khomeini's movement while the Shah was still in power. Iranian elites have not always agreed on the need to maintain pure enmity toward the U.S., however. The apex of the idea of rapprochement came during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997 to 2005). Khamenei swiftly and aggressively rejected Khatami's attempts to soften Iran's policy toward the West. His rejection of rapprochement was not universally supported, and Velayati was among the quickest to echo the Supreme Leader's harsh repudiation of the president.

Khamenei hastened to undermine Khatami's attempts to soften Iran's foreign policy. In December 2007, Khatami was scheduled to address the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). His presentation would have elaborated on his proposed "Dialogue of Civilizations" —the title given to his efforts to thaw relations between Iran and the West. One week before the event, however, the Supreme Leader took Khatami's place in the program in order to "determine the orientation of activities" during the conference.<sup>46</sup> In place of a discourse on the Dialogue of Civilizations, Khamenei explained that "Western civilization is directing the world towards materialism, while money, gluttony and carnal desires are made the greatest aspirations.... The enemy propaganda is trying to tarnish the image of Islam... the Zionists and above all the United States are behind this campaign."<sup>47</sup> Khamenei further warned attendees that they

should fear “the poisonous breath” of the United States rather than Iran.<sup>48</sup> Khatami addressed the conference in a later session and attempted to contrast his foreign policy agenda with the Supreme Leader’s by declaring that “our era is an era of preponderance of the Western culture and civilization, whose understanding is imperative,” but Khamenei had already decisively reaffirmed the Islamic Republic’s commitment to its revolutionary foreign policy and hostility toward the West.

Khamenei repeated this maneuver shortly after the conclusion of the OIC event. Knowing that Khatami was scheduled to conduct an interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour, Khamenei, used his sermon at Friday prayers in Tehran—a venue that regularly draws thousands and all of Iran’s major state-media outlets—to accuse American leaders of striving to “build a gap between the people and Iranian leaders.” He added that Western states were employing “guileful propaganda tricks” in order to “bring about instability and insecurity in [Iran].”<sup>49</sup> To ensure that his message was received by Khatami, his supporters, and those in the United States encouraged by the reformist president’s attempts to alter Iran’s foreign policy, the Supreme Leader spoke plainly: “Talks with the United States have no benefit...and are harmful to us.”<sup>50</sup>

Although some in the regime remained supportive of Khatami’s diplomatic efforts, particularly in the reformist-dominated parliament, Velayati defended the Supreme Leader’s foreign policy by adamantly expounding the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary line, persistently rejecting rapprochement, and criticizing U.S. policy in the region. Shortly after becoming Khamenei’s advisor for foreign affairs, Velayati called those within Iran who would even suggest talks with Americans “stupid,” adding the following year that “no intelligent person could accept negotiating with the U.S.”<sup>51</sup> Addressing students in Mashhad in 2002, Velayati called previous negotiations between the U.S. and Latin American countries “one-sided” and “humiliating,” asserting that if Iran were to do the same, it would be “allowing others to define our destiny.”<sup>52</sup> In February 2002, three months after Khatami told the UN General Assembly that “beyond mere rhetoric, one can see the convergence of ideas of the people of the United States and Iran,” Velayati compared President George W. Bush with Adolf Hitler: “what was Hitler’s argument?... He used to say things like that. He used to say: We are right. Whoever is not like that is against us.... Now, Mr. Bush is saying something like that.”<sup>53</sup> Two years later, Khatami, now under serious attack by Iran’s hardliners, attempted to resuscitate his “Dialogue of Civilizations” by asserting that “[Iran’s] policy is a policy of détente.... We intend to have ties and peaceful relations with all nations in the world [except Israel].”<sup>54</sup> Velayati responded by directly attacking Khatami and the supporters of his retooled foreign policy, accusing “proponents of resumption of ties with the U.S.” of being “either naive or unaware of political realities,” adding that “[Iran’s] revolution was not just against the monarchy, it was also against the U.S.”<sup>55</sup> Notably, ten days after Velayati made the above criticisms, Khamenei echoed his advisor’s earlier Hitler comparison: “The president of the country which claims to enjoy freedom and human rights talks to the people of the world using the language of Hitler.”<sup>56</sup>

Although Khatami was critical of the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, he was careful to restrain his rhetoric in order to remain consistent with his efforts to remake Iran’s image in the international community. For example, in 2004 Khatami accused the United States of implementing “unilateral policies followed by double standards,” but went no further, adding only that “the Islamic religion allows for peace and security in the region and a true dialogue between the world’s civilizations.”<sup>57</sup> In contrast, speaking on the subject of Iraq during Mashhad’s Friday prayers in 2003, Khamenei called for an “Islamic Awakening” to create “the most serious obstacle to the realization of



U.S. plans in the Muslim world.”<sup>58</sup> The following year, Khamenei said, “The United States has reached a dead end in Iraq, like a trapped wolf... It is trying to frighten people by roaring and clawing. But the people of Iraq will not allow the United States to swallow their country.”<sup>59</sup> Velayati had expressed a similar view the previous week, declaring that “the Americans, by affronting holy sites across Iraq, have now sown the seeds of combat and resistance, whose sibling will be irrigated with the blood of martyrs.”<sup>60</sup> Again, in 2007, Velayati rejected the possibility of Iran cooperating with the U.S. in Iraq and intimated that Iran would actively oppose U.S. efforts: “Naturally they are looking for a way to end the Iraqi crisis gracefully with fewer casualties and less adverse effects.... Of course, Iran does not intend to provide circumstances whereby the occupiers can end their occupation gracefully.”<sup>61</sup>

Velayati’s consistent, ideologically-rooted and antagonistic statements, closely mirroring Khamenei’s rhetoric, suggest that he has worked actively to promote the Supreme Leader’s revolutionary foreign policy in his role as senior advisor. His aggressive stance on Palestine is indistinguishable from that of Khamenei, who routinely asserts his opposition to Israel and wears a *keffiyeh* in a gesture of support for Palestinian resistance. In fact, Velayati even penned the preface to Khamenei’s book entitled *Palestine*, published in October 2011.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Velayati’s public commentary on the United States has aligned with the aggressive anti-Americanism that has been a foundation of the clerical elite’s politico-ideology since the earliest days of the 1979 revolution and zealously promulgated by Iran’s Supreme Leader. Despite some misguided sources describing him as a moderate voice in Tehran, Velayati’s rhetoric demonstrates an ideological alliance with Khamenei and shows him to be a strong advocate of the Supreme Leader’s foreign policy, even when it diverged from that of Iran’s president.

## **ROLE IN KHAMENEI’S FOREIGN POLICY APPARATUS**

Velayati’s position as senior advisor to the Supreme Leader for foreign affairs, his seat on Khamenei’s Strategic Council on Foreign Relations and his consistent public support for Khamenei’s hardline views indicate that he plays a role in the Supreme Leader’s foreign policy efforts. His diplomatic activity during his tenure as advisor to the Supreme Leader suggests that he is more than a mouthpiece, and in fact, is actively engaged in the implementation of Khamenei’s foreign policy, although the extent of his influence remains unclear.

Velayati has held several high-level meetings with the heads of state, foreign ministers, and security officials of some of Iran’s most important strategic partners, including Syria, Russia, and Iraq even after his removal from the foreign ministry in 1997. Velayati’s relationship with the Assad regime in Syria is substantial, dating back to the early years of the revolution and extending to the present day. Velayati’s first reported contact with Syrian officials occurred in July 1982, just days after Israel went to war with Lebanon. According to Velayati, the Iranian delegation met with former Syrian President Hafez al Assad in Damascus “to coordinate the political and military aspects of relations between Iran and Syria in the light of the recent invasion of southern Lebanon by Zionist forces...on the order of the arch-Satan, America.”<sup>63</sup> Velayati returned to Damascus for meetings with Assad in 1983, and again in 1984, when he accompanied then-President, Hojjat al-Eslam Ali Khamenei.<sup>64</sup> Velayati met Assad again in Damascus in June 1994 and March, May, and July of 1997.<sup>65</sup>

When Hafez al Assad died in June 2000, Velayati—no longer foreign minister—attended the funeral service in Damascus with Iran’s president, Mohammad Khatami.<sup>66</sup> Velayati was back in Damascus the next month to meet privately with Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al Shar’a and new President Bashar al

Assad.<sup>67</sup> Iranian ambassador to Damascus Hassan Sheikholeslam was present at Velayati's meeting with Assad; Khatami's Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharrazi, was not.<sup>68</sup> Finally, Velayati returned to Damascus in August 2010 to meet Vice President Faruq al Shar'a, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, and President Bashar al Assad.<sup>69</sup> There have been no reports of Velayati traveling to Damascus since regional turmoil spilled into Syria and engulfed the Assad regime earlier this year. It seems likely that Iran's Quds Force has become Khamenei's primary channel to Damascus, to which it is providing operational support for Assad's crackdown.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, Velayati expressed support for his beleaguered ally in a press statement announcing the organization of the Islamic Awakening Conference in Tehran: "With regards to Syria, it is important to note that the very countries that have not welcomed (democratic) changes in the Arab world, are taking advantage of the situation to break down (the anti-Israeli) resistance, and Syria is the best target."<sup>71</sup>

Aside from his activity in Syria, evidence of Velayati's role within Khamenei's parallel foreign policy apparatus is most clearly manifested in his repeated meetings with the leaders of Iran's proxies and other regional terrorist groups. Velayati began cultivating his connection with the leadership of these groups during his years as foreign minister, but continued them after his removal from that position. Velayati and his Syrian counterpart Faruq al Shar'a negotiated a peace agreement between Lebanese Hezbollah and Amal in 1989.<sup>72</sup> Velayati met Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem in Iran to discuss "developments in Lebanon" two years later.<sup>73</sup> The two met again in 1992.<sup>74</sup> In 1992, Velayati accompanied Supreme Leader Khamenei to separate meetings in Iran with Nasrallah and leaders of Hamas.<sup>75</sup> Velayati met Nasrallah and a delegation of Lebanese Hezbollah in Damascus in June 1994 after conferring with Hafez al Assad about "Israel's recent aggression on Hezbollah's base in the Lebanese al Bija."<sup>76</sup> Although the details of these talks have not been revealed, it is worth noting that, one month after this meeting a bomb detonated at the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) building in Buenos Aires Argentina, killing 85 and wounding several hundred more. The Argentine government has blamed elements of Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian government for this crime and indicted Velayati, Khamenei, former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and intelligence minister Ali Fallahian for their role in planning the attack.<sup>77</sup> That same year, two months prior, Velayati was part of an Iranian delegation that met Hamas Political Bureau Chief Musa Abu Marzuq and Political Bureau members Ibrahim Ghwashah and Imad al Alami in Tehran.<sup>78</sup> In the final months of his tenure as Iran's foreign minister, Velayati met once again with Nasrallah (at the Iranian embassy in Lebanon) and with the head of the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) political department, Faruq al Qaddumi (in Tunisia).<sup>79</sup>

Velayati has maintained contact with the leadership of Iran's proxies and other regional terrorist groups after his removal from the foreign ministry. Velayati met several high-ranking Hamas officials in a July 2000 trip to Syria, including Political Bureau Chief Khaled Meshaal; Political Bureau Deputy Chairman Musa Abu Marzuq; Spokesman Ibrahim Ghawshah, and; representatives of Hamas in Damascus and Tehran.<sup>80</sup> Velayati travelled in July 2004 to the Lebanese village of Tulin, home to senior Hamas official Ghalib Awali, who had been assassinated in southern Lebanon the week prior. While in Tulin, Velayati toured southern Lebanon with Sheikh Nabil Qaouk, a senior Lebanese Hezbollah commander.<sup>81</sup> During their time together, Velayati asserted, characteristically, that "the main issue facing everyone in the region is the policy and plans of the US and the complete and blind US support for the Zionist enemy."<sup>82</sup> In 2010, on his return trip to Damascus, Velayati stopped off in Lebanon to meet separately with Nasrallah of Hezbollah, Meshaal of Hamas, and Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Ramadan

Abdullah, currently designated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as one of its most wanted terrorists.<sup>83</sup> During the 2011 Islamic Awakening Conference in Tehran, Velayati met again with Ramadan Abdullah.<sup>84</sup> The conference, chaired by Velayati, was also attended by Naim Qassem, Musa Abu Marzuq, Secretary General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine Ahmad Jibreel, head of the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq Seyyed Ammar al Hakim, and unnamed Taliban leaders.<sup>85</sup>

Velayati has played a role in Iran’s diplomacy with other key allies from his position as Khamenei’s advisor. He travelled to Baghdad in February 2009 to meet several influential Iraqis, including former speaker of parliament Mahmoud Mashhadani; National Security Advisor Muwaffaq al Rubaie; former Prime Minister Seyyed Ibrahim al Ja’fari; Vice-President Adel Abdul Mahdi; leader of the Iraqi National Congress Party Ahmad Chalabi; leader of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council Hojjat al-Eslam Seyyed Ammar al Hakim; President Jalal Talabani, and; Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Sistani.<sup>86</sup> The details of these meetings were not disclosed, but they occurred during the same period in which Iraq’s provincial elections were held Ahmad Chalabi is alleged to have developed a strategy with Iran in 2009 to unify Shi’a political parties within Iraq at that time, and results for Iraq’s provincial elections were announced just days after Velayati departed for Tehran.<sup>87</sup> Velayati returned to Iraq in February 2011 to meet with Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Sistani again and other “senior Iraqi officials.”<sup>88</sup>

**TABLE: Sample of high-profile diplomatic meetings attended by Velayati since 1997**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Met with</b>	<b>Location</b>
March 19, 2003	Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf <sup>89</sup>	Islamabad, Pakistan
March 21, 2003	Indian Prime Minister Bihari Vajpayee <sup>90</sup>	Baghdad, Iraq
May 17, 2004	Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov <sup>91</sup>	Moscow, Russia
April 2006*	Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz al Saud <sup>92</sup>	Saudi Arabia**
March 7, 2007	Yemeni Foreign Minister Abdullah al Qiribi <sup>93</sup>	Yemen**
November 2007*	French President Nicolas Sarkozy <sup>94</sup>	Unknown
February 13, 2008	United Arab Emirates’ Prime Minister Sheikh Muhammad bin Rashid al Maktum <sup>95</sup>	UAE**
December 19, 2010	Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan <sup>96</sup>	Istanbul, Turkey
September 24, 2011	Afghan President Hamid Karzai <sup>97</sup>	Kabul, Afghanistan

\* Exact date unknown.\*\* Exact location unknown.

Heads of state use personal envoys in addition to formal diplomatic structures periodically. There is nothing, therefore, inherently odd about Velayati’s continued involvement in Iranian diplomacy after his removal from power at the foreign ministry. Its significance, rather, is two-fold. First, it is a piece of evidence that can help clarify the role that the Supreme Leader actually plays in Iranian foreign policy, since Velayati is so clearly reporting directly to—and messaging directly from—Khamenei rather than from the president. Second, it provides a glimpse of the kind of messaging that those most dependent on, and presumably devoted to, the Supreme Leader feel that he wants to hear. That glimpse is not reassuring.

**APPENDIX: Iranian officials connected to Velayati through organizational affiliation**

Name	Organizational affiliation with Velayati	Current Position	Other Significant Positions Held
<b>Foreign Ministry</b>			
Alaeddin Boroujerdi	Deputy Foreign Minister for Asia-Pacific Affairs (Rafsanjani presidency)	MP (2000-present), Chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy commission (2007-present)	Deputy Advisor to the Supreme Leader for International Affairs <sup>98</sup>
Sa'id Jalili	Several positions in Foreign Ministry (1989-1997)	Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (2007-present)	Director-General of the Office of the Supreme Leader; Deputy Foreign Minister for European and American Affairs <sup>99</sup>
Abbas Maleki	Deputy Foreign Minister for Research and Education (1989-1997)	Senior associate of Harvard's Belfer Center's International Security Program; Associate Professor, Sharif University, Iran	Advisor to Foreign Minister (1997-2002); Advisor to Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance (1997-2000) <sup>100</sup>
Mahmoud Vaezi	Deputy Foreign Minister for European and American Affairs (1988-1997)	Deputy of Foreign Policy and International Relations at Expediency Council's Council for Strategic Research (1999-present)	Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Affairs (1998-1999) <sup>101</sup>
Mohammad-Javad Zarif	Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs (1992-1997), Deputy Representative to the UN (1989-1992)	Faculty, Iranian School of International Relations, Tehran	Iranian Ambassador to the UN (2003-2007); Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs (2001-2002) <sup>102</sup>
<b>Strategic Council on Foreign Relations</b>			
Kamal Kharrazi	Chair, Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (1997-present)	Chair, Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (1997-present)	Iranian Ambassador to the UN (1989-1997)
Ali Shamkhani	Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (1997-present)	Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (1997-present); Director of the Iranian Armed Forces' Center for Strategic Studies <sup>103</sup>	Minister of Defense (1997-2005); IRGC Minister, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces; IRGC Navy Commander; IRGC Deputy Commander <sup>104</sup>
Mohammad Shariatmadari	Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (1997-present)	Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (1997-present)	Commerce Minister (1997-2005), Founder of Iran's Intelligence Ministry and IRGC

			Komiteh's <sup>105</sup>
Mohammad Hossein Tarami	Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (1997-present)	Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (1997-present)	IRIB Broadcasting Political Deputy <sup>106</sup>
<b>Expediency Council</b> <i>Only includes members who served continuously with Velayati since 1997<sup>107</sup></i>			
Habibollah Asgharowladi	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Secretary General of the of the Line of the Imam and Leader front	Minister of Commerce (1980-1984); Secretary General of the Islamic Coalition Party <sup>108</sup>
Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Member, Assembly of Experts; Interim Tehran Friday Prayer Leader <sup>109</sup>	N/A
Hassan Firouzabadi	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Chairman, Iran's Joint Chiefs of Staff <sup>110</sup> (1989-present)	Member, Supreme National Security Council (1989-present); Deputy Defense Minister (1985) <sup>111</sup>
Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Chairman, Guardian Council (1988-present)	Member, Assembly of Experts (1983-present) <sup>112</sup>
Ali Larijani	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Speaker, Iran's Parliament (2008-present)	Secretary, Supreme National Security Council (2005-2007); Head of IRIB (1994-2004)
Mir-Hossein Mousavi	Expediency Council, (1989-present)	N/A	Foreign Minister (1981); Prime Minister (1981-1989); Ayatollah Khomeini's representative to the Foundation of the Oppressed (1981-1989) <sup>113</sup>
Mostafa Mir-Salim	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance (1992-1997)	National police chief (1980) <sup>114</sup>
Ayatollah Qorbanali Dorri Najaf-Abadi	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Minister of Intelligence (1997-1999) <sup>115</sup>	Attorney-General (1999-2005) <sup>116</sup>
Bijan Namdar Zanganeh	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	N/A	Minister of Petroleum (1997-2005) <sup>117</sup>
Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Board, Azad University (1982-present)	President (1989-1997); Chairman, (2007-2011) Member, (2006-2011) Assembly of Experts; Speaker of the Parliament (1980-1989) <sup>118</sup>
Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	N/A	Minister of Intelligence (1984-1989);

			Representative of the Supreme Leader to Hajj Pilgrims <sup>119</sup>
Mohsen Rezaei	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Chairman, Expediency Council (1997-present)	Commander, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (1981-1997) <sup>120</sup>
Hojjat al-Eslam Hassan Rouhani	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Representative of the Supreme Leader to the Supreme National Security Council (1989-present)	President, Expediency Council Center for Strategic Research (1992-present); Member, Assembly of Experts (1999-present) <sup>121</sup>
Ayatollah Hassan Sanei	Expediency Council, (1992-present)	N/A	Head, 15 <sup>th</sup> Khordad Foundation <sup>122</sup>
Ayatollah Abbas Vaez Tabasi	Expediency Council, (1997-present)	Head, Imam Reza Foundation (~1982-present)	Representative of the Supreme Leader in Khorasan Province <sup>123</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Biography," Velayati's personal website. Available: <http://www.velayati.ir/?lang=en&p=09>.

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