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Raisi's Rising Elite: The Imam Sadeghis, Iran's Indoctrinated Technocrats

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Executive Summary

The administration of Iran's new president, hardline Islamist cleric Ebrahim Raisi, is now crystallising. A student and loyal follower of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Raisi was groomed to become president to 'purify' the Islamic Republic. For Khamenei and his hardline followers, purification is necessary to advance the next stage of the Islamic Revolution – the creation of an idealist Islamic state – which, they believe, has not yet been achieved.¹

As well as cleansing the system of Western influences, one of the goals of an Islamic state is to make the Islamic Republic more efficient by reversing decades of government mismanagement. To advance this goal, Iran's clerical regime is aware that it requires trained technocrats and bureaucrats who can implement the regime's policies.

However, Khamenei and his close circle believe that running an Islamic state requires ideologically devoted technocrats equipped with both modern knowledge and religious-ideological training. The supreme leader and his allies blame decades of mismanagement in the Islamic Republic not on corruption and a lack of technical expertise but on Western-oriented and -educated technocrats not having undergone the ideological-religious training they believe is required to run an Islamic state. As Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, the supreme leader's representative to Iran's eastern Khorasan Razavi province and Raisi's father-in-law, asserted in October 2020, "Belief in the [Islamic] Revolution is the difference between classical and jihadi management styles ... if this jihadi management style, which genuinely believes in the revolution and God, enters our social and political life, all the problems can be solved."²

In lockstep with the views of Khamenei and Alamolhoda, Raisi is replacing the Islamic Republic's old cohort of specialists – faces familiar to the West like Javad Zarif, a former foreign minister, and Ali Akbar Salehi, a former head of Iran's atomic energy agency – with new, so-called jihadi and

hizballahi technocrats who have undergone years of intensive ideological indoctrination alongside their skills training. These changes, the first of their kind in 42 years, are shifting the power equilibrium in Iran's regime.

These replacements are not aimed at displacing Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the clerical regime's ideological army, as the bedrock of Raisi's administration. Indeed, the president has awarded IRGC affiliates senior cabinet positions, including those of foreign and interior minister.³ Rather, Raisi's push to purify the technocracy is precipitating the mass rise of another elite group in Iran – one that is entirely unfamiliar to the West.

This emerging cohort can be best described as ideological technocrats. They all have one important affiliation in common: the Imam Sadegh University (ISU), an elite institution designed to indoctrinate Iran's next generation of civil servants. From August to October 2021, alumni of the university, known as *Imam Sadeghis*, packed out key technocratic postings across ministries and the state bureaucracy. Some of the most prominent among them are Ehsan Khandoozi, economics minister; Ali Bagheri Kani, the deputy foreign minister selected to lead international negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme; Hojatollah Abdolmaleki, minister of cooperatives, labour and social welfare; Meysam Latifi, vice-president and head of employment affairs; Peyman Jebelli, the head of Iranian state broadcasting; and Ali Salehabadi, the governor of the Central Bank of Iran (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

PROMINENT IMAM SADEGHIS IN RAISI'S ADMINISTRATION



Ehsan Khandoozi
Economics minister



Ali Bagheri Kani
Deputy foreign minister and lead
nuclear negotiator



Hojatollah Abdolmaleki
Minister of cooperatives,
labour and social welfare

This trend has resulted in the emergence of the *Imam Sadeghis* as a new social identity among the Islamic Republic's elites, replacing traditional technocrats. The West has typically viewed Iran's technocratic class as the so-called pragmatic and nonideological branch of the clerical regime, as opposed to the IRGC's zealous ideologues in uniform. But while observably nonmilitaristic, the emerging technocrats of ISU are equally ideological, having gone through rigorous selection processes to enrol and extensive indoctrination to graduate.

The structure of the Islamic Republic's elites has conventionally been shaped by an alliance between the clergy and the IRGC, with technocrats deliberately kept away from the core of the regime's decision-making. This is partly because the clerical regime has been suspicious of Iran's technocracy, viewing it as Western oriented and influenced and, ultimately, uncommitted to the hardline Islamist vision of the Office of the Supreme Leader (*Bayt-e Rahbari*). However, both the clergy and the IRGC have come to realise that to operationalise this vision, they need a skilled and trained workforce. The rise of the *Imam Sadeghis* under Raisi is satisfying this demand and, by altering Iran's elite dynamic for the first time, is resulting in an emerging three-way alliance between the clergy, the IRGC and ideological technocrats.

As Western policymakers try to make sense of the nature and priorities of Raisi's presidency to formulate a policy stance, it is vital they understand the nuances of both the IRGC and the *Imam Sadeghis*, the forces behind Raisi's administration. In fact, in many ways, understanding the latter is even more critical. This is because there is an erroneous perception in the West that the Islamic Republic's technocrats are nonideological. As the outdated reformist-hardliner dichotomy in the Islamic Republic's politics comes to an end, Western policymakers may misread Raisi's technocrats as the lesser of two evils – men in suits presenting themselves as individuals with whom the West can do business. To avoid this trap, it is of utmost importance that policymakers familiarise themselves with ISU, its cohort and the Iranian regime's emerging elite.

The rise of the *Imam Sadeghis* will also have significant implications on the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign policies. Coupled with the empowerment of the IRGC under Raisi, this shift in the power equilibrium will mean greater coordination between Iran's ministries and the Guard. That will result in more significant support for the IRGC's external ambitions and a blurring of lines between “diplomacy and the battlefield”, as Zarif once said.⁴ The United States must familiarise itself with this rising elite in Iran so it can foresee the regime's direction of travel before making a decision on

re-entering the 2015 international agreement on Iran's nuclear programme. Such a move would free up \$90 billion in sanctions relief for Raisi, the IRGC and the *Imam Sadeghis*.⁵

Until now, there has been very little insight into ISU or the *Imam Sadeghis*. Using new primary Persian-language material, this report is the first comprehensive analysis of the *Imam Sadeghis* and their alma mater – the institution designed to provide the Islamic Republic with indoctrinated technocrats who can carry out the next stage of the revolution envisaged by Iran's supreme leader.



The Fall and Rise of Technocrats in the Islamic Republic

The 1979 Islamic Revolution ushered in a period of de-bureaucratisation, during which many technocrats were fired and numerous formerly bureaucratic functions were transferred to Iran's clergy and revolutionary youth. The clergy viewed the technocrats as Western-oriented individuals with modern, Western solutions that were incompatible with their hardline Islamist vision. Ultimately, the clergy saw the technocrats as uncommitted to the Islamic Revolution.

In turn, young revolutionaries and clerics with no previous experience acquired positions in the state bureaucracy and gradually shaped a new religious technocratic elite. Civil servants and managers were prejudicially hired or promoted on the basis of their *taahhod* (ideological commitment) instead of their *takhasoos* (technical expertise).

The distinction between ideological commitment and technical expertise in the bureaucracy is not unique to Iran's Shia Islamist system and can be seen throughout other authoritarian ideological regimes. Combining indoctrination with administration was a particular focus for communist systems like the former Soviet Union or Mao Zedong's China.

In Iran, it took a few years before the revolutionary regime understood the importance of the state bureaucracy. But even after 1983 – when the needs of a growing and developing state forced the Iranian government to reconsider its hostility to technocratic management – the system attempted to hire more ideological followers as its new public servants.

It was not until the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani from 1989 to 1997 that this dynamic started to shift. Rafsanjani primarily de-ideologised the machinery of government and lessened the ideological pressure on Iranian society by prioritising *takhasoos* over *taahhod*. This shift led to the rehiring of some technocrats who had been fired in the first decade after the revolution. During this time, the leaders of Iran's various newly streamlined bureaucratic

and technocratic organisations began to emerge as powerful political elites. Rafsanjani's cabinet was composed mainly of religious technocratic personalities who had studied in the West under the former Pahlavi regime and later joined the state bureaucracy after pledging allegiance to the revolutionary regime.

These new elites subsequently created the Executives of Construction of Iran Party (*Hezbe Kargozarane Sazandegi*), a right-wing technocratic party that won a substantial number of seats in Iran's 1996 parliamentary election. This situation continued in the first period of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, from 1997 to 2001.

As a populist, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did not believe in the bureaucracy or technocrats – a belief particularly apparent in the first term of his presidency from 2005 to 2009. During his electoral campaign, Ahmadinejad criticised the red tape associated with Iran's massive bureaucratic state and the economic philosophy of state-centrism. After becoming president, he dismantled many aspects of the bureaucracy, including the Management and Planning Organisation (MPO), to implement his populist policies without opposition.

The election of Hassan Rouhani as president in 2013 led to efforts to revive aspects of the Rafsanjani period. Rouhani attempted to make the state bureaucracy less ideological and selected Western-educated technocrats, who, while being committed to the regime and coming from religious backgrounds, were geared towards *takhasoos* rather than *taahhod*. This is a point demonstrated in part by the fact that the Rouhani cabinet had more members with PhDs from US universities than the cabinet of then US President Barack Obama. In July 2015, Rouhani also revived Iran's MPO.

Since 1979, the pendulum of Iran's bureaucracy has swung back and forth between *takhasoos* and *taahhod*. Now, Raisi is using ISU as the crucible to fuse the two.

The Imam Sadegh University: Iran's Idealist Islamist Institution

“The Islamist nature of the system depends on having a programme derived from Islam and executives and officials aware of Islamic principles ... Without these two things, the Islamic government will gradually be emptied from within and will move towards a government that has only an Islamic appearance,” asserts the Imam Sadegh University (ISU) website.⁶

ISU was established in 1982 to satisfy this need for a system rooted in Islamic principles. From the outset, the objective was to create an elite institution that would provide Iran's new clerical regime with staff who would be ideologically committed to the Islamic Revolution.

ISU's founder was the late Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, a former head of Iran's Assembly of Experts and the Combatant Clergy Association, a union of hardline Islamist clerics (see Figures 2 and 3). He believed that ISU's creation was necessary to sustain the ideological purity of the system, nurture an Islamic society in Iran and move towards the goal of an Islamic civilisation.⁷ Before the 1979 revolution, Mahdavi Kani – with other members of the Combatant Clergy Association, such as the late Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri – had long aspired to establish an Islamic university based on an alliance between *hawzas* (Shia seminaries) and higher-education institutions.⁸

Figure 2

**ALI KHAMENEI, THEN PRESIDENT (1981-1989), MEETS WITH
AYATOLLAH MOHAMMAD REZA MAHDAVI KANI AT ISU**



Figure 3

AYATOLLAH MOHAMMAD REZA MAHDAVI KANI



This ideal would finally be achieved through the formation of ISU, which was established as Iran's first Islamic university amid the Cultural Revolution in the early 1980s, when Iranian universities were closed to eradicate Western influences from academia. While almost all Iranian universities were Islamised by the state as a result of the Cultural Revolution, what set ISU apart was the fact that it was based on Islamist principles from the beginning. As Seyed Mojtaba Emami, the current vice-chancellor for research at ISU, has explained, the university “does not have an identity without Islamic principles” and “has dealt with interdisciplinary fields in an Islamic way from the beginning”.⁹

ISU was established on the principle of “unity between universities and *hawzas*” with the objective of nurturing the future policymakers, technocrats and experts of the Islamic Republic.¹⁰ It is worth highlighting that Iran's incumbent supreme leader, Khamenei, was a member of ISU's original board of trustees.¹¹ Today, Khamenei maintains control over ISU by directly appointing its board of trustees and its chair, who then select the head of the university. In the words of Abdolmaleki, “In a way, Imam Sadegh University is under the authority of the Office of the Supreme Leader.”¹²

AN INSTITUTION WITH GRAND ISLAMIST AMBITIONS

Since its inception, the university's outlook and grand ambitions have not been confined to the Iranian state. For Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, and his successor as supreme leader, Khamenei, the purpose of the Islamic Revolution was and is to achieve an Islamic civilisation that would be emulated by Muslim populations and compete with Western liberalism and Eastern communism. In many ways, ISU sees itself as the institution that can operationalise this grand, long-term vision by fostering Islamist thought leaders.

As Emami has contended, “Western civilisation first began as an idea created in the mind, and then it reached the output [stage], and finally it was able to have an impact on society step by step. Of course, this process took several hundred years, but we do not want to spend this long time, we want to achieve the desired result sooner.”¹³ The university's role as an incubator of thought leadership for the grand ambition of creating an Islamic civilisation has been ingrained into its students and graduates and is a central component of the *Imam Sadeghis'* psyche. As Latifi has asserted, “We are at a very important point in history ... Imam Sadegh University has raised a flag that believes a new [Islamic] civilisation can be formed.”¹⁴

To support the implementation of these ambitions and manage its day-to-day operations, ISU has crafted a mini economic conglomerate within Iran. This wealth derived in part from the decision to establish the university on the premises of Iran's former Harvard School of Management, an elite school set up under the shah.¹⁵ Beyond this, ISU's original financial backers came from Iran's religious merchant class – the *baazaris* – who had formed an alliance with the new ruling clerical establishment and were an instrumental force behind the Islamic Revolution.

These *baazaris* were keen to sponsor Mahdavi Kani's idea of establishing an Islamic university and, with the support of the Qom clergy, formed the Imam Sadegh Society Holding and the Economic Institution of Imam Sadegh.¹⁶ Over time, these two organisations have extended their reach across various industries in the Iranian economy, including textiles and pharmaceuticals, as well as major shopping malls and markets across Tehran, such as the Milad Noor Shopping Centre and Passage Noor.¹⁷



Nurturing a Soft Islamist Cult: From Admission to Graduation

“Becoming an *Imam Sadeghi* is a kind of lifestyle choice, it’s a culture,” according to one ISU graduate.¹⁸ The university is no ordinary centre of academia. It is an exclusivist, elitist, closed-minded and cult-like institution, reserved for a certain breed of regime supporters. In fact, even by the standards of the Islamic Republic, ISU’s policies contradict the basic notions of universities, with strict procedures to discourage ideological and intellectual diversity.

IRAN’S MOST RIGOROUS ADMISSIONS PROCESS

This position is explicitly reflected in ISU’s admissions policies. The university states that it “tries to select religious, ideological and academically talented students [and] professors”.¹⁹ This translates to ISU giving preference to ideological and religious credentials over academic competence, with an admissions process that is carefully crafted to select hardline regime supporters and oust non-Islamist applicants.

One of the university’s official criteria for admission is commitment to “the holy system of the Islamic Republic of Iran and absolute *velayat-e faqih*”.²⁰ Committed followers of absolute *velayat-e faqih* – the Shia Islamist system of governance enshrined in the Iranian constitution, which transfers absolute guardianship of the state to the supreme leader as God’s representative on Earth – not only accept this theory of governance but also seek to implement Khamenei’s practical, day-to-day wishes. As one Iranian newspaper has stated, ISU students are all “firm believers in the Islamist system” and are aware that they are being “nurtured for the Islamic Republic’s policymaking table”.²¹

ISU has the most rigorous selection process of all Iranian universities. Not only do applicants have to undergo the standard Iranian university entrance exam (*konkour*), but they are also required to pass two rounds

of interviews designed to filter out nonreligious and nonideological candidates.²² Whereas the first interview is hosted on the main university campus, the second takes place in the candidate's family home.

The latter, which is carried out by senior enrolled students, is designed to assess the applicant's religious and ideological credentials. The measures even go as far as inspecting the candidate's bedroom and choices of reading material and music to guarantee an absence of non-Islamic and antiregime influences. This inspection is coupled with a neighbourhood watch-style examination of the candidate's family in their area of residence to ensure the individual and his or her family are pious regime supporters who attend the local mosque and participate in religious and pro-regime gatherings.²³

Throughout this process, it becomes easy to distinguish between true Islamists committed to the regime and those with merely a religious appearance. Quite often, students who gain access to ISU are trusted relatives of the Islamic Republic's inner elite, like Alamolhoda's son, who once ran ISU's student newspaper, or Faridodin Haddad-Adel, the son of Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, a senior policymaker and the father-in-law of the supreme leader's son, Mojtaba Khamenei.

This entire rigorous admissions process has one objective: to prevent students with different ideological inclinations from entering the university, thus preserving its uniformly religious and ideologically pure environment.²⁴

FROM ENROLMENT TO INDOCTRINATION

These checks are just the beginning for the few applicants who pass the admissions process. The university states that it "aims to improve its students' faith, religious zeal, Islamic morality and self-purification by creating a healthy religious and moral environment and providing practical teachings and examples".²⁵ In other words, once a student enrolls, ISU's process of ideological indoctrination begins.

As a first step towards indoctrination, the university, which enforces strict gender segregation, discourages its students from interacting with non-ISU Iranians. This policy ensures that students are kept in what can only be described as an ideologically pure bubble, shielded from any devious and un-Islamic views that might dilute their values. Until the late 1990s, ISU students, most of whom reside in dormitories, were not even permitted to leave the university campus.²⁶ These tactics mimic the methods used by the IRGC as part of its programme of ideological-political training for its recruits.²⁷

Every aspect of the university environment is strictly controlled and monitored, and ISU makes no distinction between private and public life. This control ranges from physical appearances – for example, male students are banned from shaving and smoking, in line with hardline Islamist practices – to the way students think and speak, including in private conversations on politics and non-Islamic affairs.

As a former ISU student attested, “At one point, [faculty members] called me and said that these political debates that you are having or the fact you are shaving your beard [is not in line with protocol], which you have to observe. This is a university that has been designed to train the future of the regime. [By ignoring protocol] you are questioning the regime itself.”²⁸ The university encourages its students to act as its eyes and ears, nurturing the same atmosphere of fear and suspicion that exists in the core of the regime.

But what really sets ISU apart from other Iranian universities is the priority it gives to ideological-religious training, through which ISU incorporates what it calls “Islamic education” across all of its faculties. This approach began with the university’s three founding faculties of Islamic education and economics, Islamic education and law, and Islamic education and political science. It was later extended to the faculties of Islamic education and management and Islamic education, culture and communication.²⁹ In addition, ISU has a college of theology and Islamic studies. In line with Khomeini’s assertion that “Islam is the solution to all problems”, the aim of the college is to explain Islamic solutions to Iran’s current and future challenges.³⁰

In all universities in Iran, students must pass around 22 academic units on ideological-religious issues as part of the Islamisation of academia since the Cultural Revolution.³¹ At ISU, the university’s structure means all undergraduates are required to pass up to 110 additional academic units that focus exclusively on ideological-religious training in the form of assessed intensive classes.³² As part of this, all ISU students learn Arabic and English. In fact, it is commonplace for ISU cohorts to combine complex Arabic with their everyday Persian to signify their proficiency in *hawza* studies, illustrating what has effectively become an elitist dialect among Iran’s ruling Islamist class.³³

Beyond languages, modules that form part of ISU’s ideological-religious training include Islamic knowledge, Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic theology, Islamic philosophy, interpretation of the Quran, *Nahjul balagha* (the sermons of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shia imam), Islamic thought and the books of Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, a Shia scholar whom the regime considers a martyr.

These classes, which are akin to indoctrination, form almost half of the material taught at ISU. Some of these classes and lectures are delivered by some of the regime’s most senior and hardline insider clerics, such as Alamolhoda, the supreme leader’s representative to Khorasan Razavi and a member of ISU’s board of trustees; Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani, Iran’s former chief justice and head of ISU’s board of trustees; Hojatoleslam Alireza Panahian, a senior member of the Office of the Supreme Leader; and Hojatoleslam Mohsen Gharati, the representative of the late Khomeini (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

SENIOR CLERICS AT THE CORE OF ISU’S IDEOLOGICAL-RELIGIOUS TRAINING



Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda

Supreme leader’s representative to Khorasan Razavi and member of ISU’s board of trustees



Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani

Former chief justice and head of ISU’s board of trustees



Hojatoleslam Alireza Panahian

Senior member of the Office of the Supreme Leader



Hojatoleslam Mohsen Gharati

Representative of the late Khomeini

Source: TBI

The fact that these classes are delivered by some of Iran’s most hardline insider clerics, who are extremely hard to access otherwise, is aimed at fostering an exclusive atmosphere designed to overwhelm students, encourage peer pressure and reward the most ideologically extreme. In the cult-like mentality fostered at ISU, students consider themselves the children of the late Mahdavi Kani, the founder of ISU, and refer to him as “father”.³⁴

Given that ISU students are being prepared for roles in government and sensitive positions in the Iranian system, the purpose of the ideological-religious training is to inculcate in students a homogeneous brand of hardline Islamism – the kind Khamenei and his close circle regard as prerequisites to serve on the inside. The goal is, effectively, to blend militant clericalism with modern managerial competence to produce a hybrid ideological technocracy. In other words, the *Imam Sadeghis* can be viewed as hardline clerics in suits.

That said, despite these efforts, ISU has not always been successful in achieving hardline ideological uniformity. This was particularly the case with the university's early graduates. Despite their allegiance to the regime, ISU considers the likes of Mostafa Kavakebian, a prominent reform-aligned politician, and Abdullah Ramazanzadeh, a former governor of Iran's Kurdistan province and former spokesman for Khatami's so-called reformist government, to be examples of graduates who do not adhere to the university's ideological hard line.³⁵ More recently, ISU has been successful in ensuring both its students and its teachers are of a certain ideological breed.

The Imam Sadeghis and the Pipeline to Power Since 1979

The past four decades have seen the *Imam Sadeghis* gradually rise within the Islamic Republic's inner elite. Over the years, ISU graduates have found themselves in technocratic and managerial roles across the most critical Iranian ministries, including those of foreign affairs, the interior, economics and culture, as well as state-run organisations.

THE KHOMEINI YEARS, 1979–1989: ISU'S TEETHING PHASE

Despite its establishment as the first Islamic university after Iran's Cultural Revolution, an absence of teaching staff in 1981 meant that ISU had to fill its vacancies with existing Iranian academics, many of whom were secular and Western oriented. European-educated academics such as Changiz Pahlavan (University of Vienna), Hossein Bashiriyeh (University of Essex), Abdul Reza Houshang Mahdavi (Sorbonne University) and Davoud Hermidas-Bavand (American University) became the core body of lecturers at ISU.³⁶

This situation had direct consequences on the institution's ability to cultivate a homogeneous hardline Islamist ideology. In fact, even ISU's website concedes that "the most that was expected from this university in the first years [of its existence] was to familiarise its religious students with Islamic principles and make them aware of modern humanities and social science".³⁷

For this reason, many early ISU graduates became aligned with the regime's so-called reformist Islamist faction of the late 1990s. These graduates included Ramazanzadeh, Kavakebian and Ali Rabiee, an advisor to Khatami and, later, Rouhani. As Ramazanzadeh has said, "At least in the first four to five graduate years, Imam Sadegh University had an atmosphere of a conflict of opinions."³⁸ Of course, the so-called reformist faction was still Islamist in nature and deeply committed to preserving Iran's theocratic regime. However, it did not represent the pure hardline Islamist ideology to which ISU's clerical leadership adhered.

Aware of this discrepancy, ISU's leadership decided to change its admissions process and nurture a generation of lecturers from its own graduates. To achieve this, the university decided that the most zealous master's graduates would be sent to the West to obtain their PhDs and would return to Iran with secured lecturer positions at ISU and other universities. As Iran's most elitist university, ISU recognised the prestige and academic excellence of Western qualifications, despite its Islamist and ideological antipathy towards the West.

From its inception, this approach resulted in the university developing a reputation for sending its postgraduate students abroad on the basis that they would obtain their doctorate degrees and return to Iran to serve the regime. The purpose was not to embrace Western thought or liberal values but to reap the rewards of advanced education in the West and understand the Western mindset. After all, ISU was designed with the aim of producing the Islamic Republic's future policymakers, and the university's leadership believed this system could give its cohort a tactical advantage over the West. To ensure its students would not be swayed by Western influences, ISU ensured that only its most zealous and ideological students were permitted to study for their PhD degrees abroad – a policy on which the university has since doubled down.

The first decade of the Islamic Revolution can, in many ways, be described as ISU's teething stage. The university was very much internally focused, aware that its longer-term ambitions could be achieved only with the right foundations. During this early period, there was also an absence of technocrats from within the Islamic Republic's elite structure, as operational and managerial positions in Iran's ministries and bureaucracy were awarded to clerics above all others.

RAFSANJANI'S PRESIDENCY, 1989–1997: A TECHOCRATIC CLASS EMERGES

The rise of the technocratic class as part of the Islamic Republic's elite began under the presidency of Rafsanjani, the forefather of the regime's so-called reformist faction. Rafsanjani's era was marked by the aftermath of the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War, which had left the Iranian state war-torn and economically ravaged. Recognising the limitations of clerical management and the need for *takhasoos*, Rafsanjani set out to foster the rise of Iranian technocrats for Iran's postwar reconstruction efforts.

However, the cohort of technocrats who were proactively targeted during the Rafsanjani years consisted of Western-educated Iranians who had been sent to study abroad under the shah. These individuals included Salehi and Mohammad Bagher Nobakht, who came from religious backgrounds but had

been awarded scholarships to study abroad and had returned to Iran after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. While committed to the regime and often coming from religious backgrounds, these technocrats had not undergone the ideological-religious training of ISU students. As a result, they found themselves aligned with the Islamic Republic's so-called reformist elite.

Just as in the first decade of the revolution, ISU was still very inward-looking during Rafsanjani's two terms in office, prioritising the sending of its graduates abroad with the eventual aim of ousting its Western-oriented teaching staff. In Rafsanjani's first term, ISU began to offer its own PhD courses as a way to speed up the cleansing of its Western-influenced lecturers.

However, several Western-educated academic experts were still able to obtain jobs at ISU during this period. They included Kavous Seyed-Emami, who, while coming from a religious family, had obtained his PhD in the US before returning to Iran as a dual Iranian-Canadian national. Remarkably, Seyed-Emami was one of the few Western-oriented academics at ISU who survived the purges that would occur in the next two decades. In 2018, however, he was imprisoned by the IRGC on spying charges and found dead in his prison cell in suspicious circumstances only a month after his arrest.³⁹

In addition to offering PhD courses, ISU also established its Sisters' Campus in the Rafsanjani period, opening the university's doors to female students for the first time in 1990.⁴⁰ Located away from ISU's main complex to ensure complete gender segregation, the campus was headed by Mahdavi Kani's wife, who became instrumental in shaping its agenda. The Sisters' Campus was the first fully segregated university campus in the Islamic Republic, with a requirement for even its faculty and educational staff to be women. Just as for its male students, ISU both enforces and cultivates a hardline Islamist atmosphere across the Sisters' Campus. As one female student stated, "In the Sisters' Campus of Imam Sadegh University, everything is in line with sharia, even laughing and running."⁴¹

The Sisters' Campus was designed to nurture a generation of female zealots, who, as well as being trained to occupy positions in the Islamic Republic, served as ideal coaches to propagate and enforce the regime's hardline Islamist vision – not least in relation to the role of women in society. As Faezeh Azimzadeh Ardabili, a faculty member of the Sisters' Campus and a member of the Cultural Council of the Women's Association, has stated, "The first principle and characteristic [for a Muslim woman is] forming a family, playing the role of mother and playing the role of wife."⁴²

THE KHATAMI PERIOD, 1997–2005: CONSOLIDATING AN IDEOLOGICAL HARD LINE

The *Imam Sadeghis'* emergence began in earnest in the late 1990s after the election of Khatami, Iran's so-called reformist president. Before this, while some ISU graduates were present across ministries, mainly the foreign ministry, their presence was scattered and not visible as a block force. This would change during the Khatami years, but not because of the president himself.

In fact, despite ISU's proclaimed political neutrality, in the run-up to Iran's 1997 presidential election, Mahdavi Kani proactively intervened for the first time against Khatami and his so-called reformist faction. Mahdavi Kani travelled across Iranian cities and towns explicitly warning of the "dangers" a Khatami presidency would bring, suggesting it could result in a "constitutional revolution".⁴³ As one ISU graduate recalled, Mahdavi Kani called on students in a speech at ISU to rally against Khatami, declaring, "Why are you silent, don't you see [Khatami's followers] are questioning *velayat-e faqih*?"⁴⁴

As a result of this intervention, Khatami opted to exclude and remove ISU graduates from the state bureaucracy because of what one *Imam Sadeghi* described as their "inconsistent ideological orientation with the government".⁴⁵ Moreover, in a move that sparked outrage at ISU, Khatami ignored Mahdavi Kani's request to appoint university graduates to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance – the ministry designed to uphold Islamist values across the regime.⁴⁶

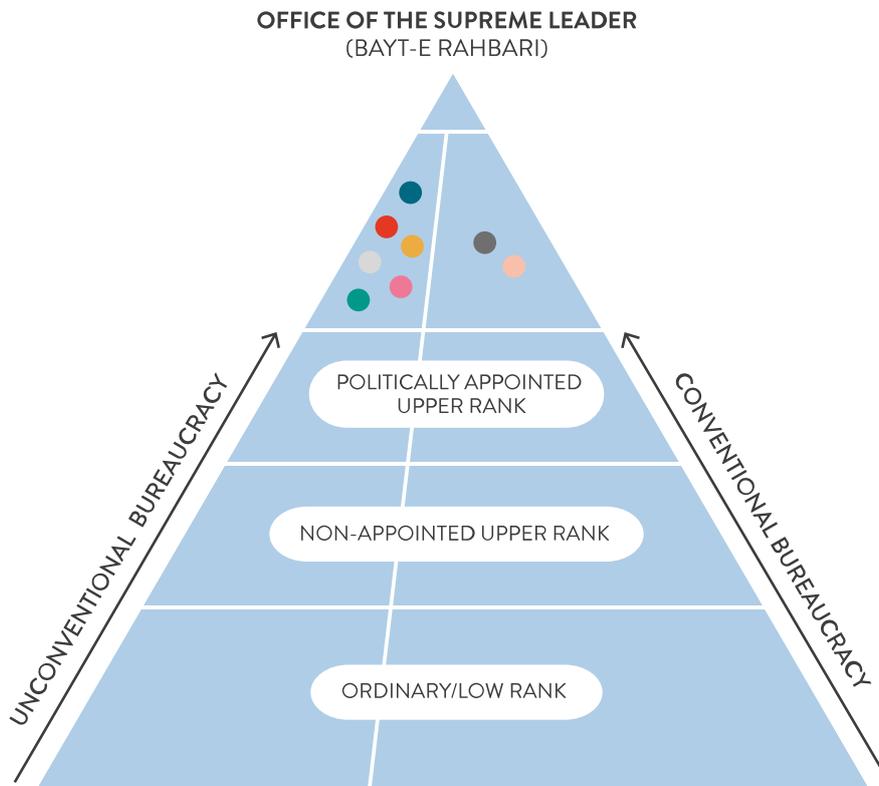
Despite Khatami's intent to exclude the *Imam Sadeghis* from his administration, there were a few exceptions, including Ramazanzadeh, who became a government spokesman, and Rabiee. However, Ramazanzadeh and Rabiee were among ISU's early graduates who had studied under the university's Western-oriented lecturers. While committed Islamists, they did not truly represent the hardline ideology being nurtured at ISU, and it is for this reason that they became aligned with the so-called reformist faction.⁴⁷

The Khatami government's exclusion of ISU graduates from senior and mid-level technocratic positions prompted the *Imam Sadeghis* to entrench themselves in Iran's unconventional bureaucracy, not least in the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the country's state broadcasting and media complex. In the Islamic Republic, the unconventional bureaucracy consists of the technocratic workforce that makes up the unelected institutions and organisations directly overseen by the supreme leader, while the conventional bureaucracy comprises the traditional civil service,

which sits under the “elected” institutions (see Figure 5). The most senior ranks across both the unconventional and the conventional bureaucracy are politically appointed.

Figure 5

THE REGIME AND BUREAUCRATIC STRUCTURE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC



Institutions:

- Expediency Council
- Judiciary
- Military
- Guardian Council
- Astan Quds Razavi Foundation
- Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)
- Executive
- Legislature

Note: Institutions are not shown in hierarchical order

Between 1997 and 2005, the ISU cohort effectively took over Iran's television and radio, especially in terms of news programming. ISU graduates had a major presence through individuals from prime-time television presenters, such as Ali Dorostkar, to Seyed Hossein Hosseini, a former head of the Iran Broadcasting University, an institution affiliated with IRIB.⁴⁸ As one journalist said, "There was a joke that [IRIB] was the second branch of Imam Sadegh University."⁴⁹

As with other authoritarian systems, the Islamic Republic considers radio and television to be among the most important aspects of the state apparatus. Broadcasting is one of the main tools used by the regime to communicate with the Iranian population and propagate its hardline Islamist, anti-Western and anti-American ideology. The *Imam Sadeghis'* entrenchment across Iran's television and radio – a position they have maintained since the Khatami era – has given them effective control over the implementation of the regime's strategic communications. What the government perceived as the *Imam Sadeghis'* successful management of IRIB, through working tirelessly to promote regime ideologues and undermine dissenting voices, contributed in part to Khamenei and his close circle supporting the ISU graduates' rise towards elite status.

Towards the end of the Khatami period, the *Imam Sadeghis* began to occupy technocratic positions across the Islamic Republic's hardline appointed institutions like the judiciary, the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council. The Guardian Council is a Khamenei-controlled body that oversees elections in the Islamic Republic and vets all legislation passed by the Iranian parliament to ensure its compliance with Islamic sharia. Meanwhile, the Expediency Council serves as a senior advisory body for Iran's supreme leader and resolves any disputes between the Guardian Council and the Iranian parliament. ISU graduates also took on senior managerial roles in financial services, such as secretary-general of Tehran Stock Exchange, a position occupied by Hossein Abdoh Tabrizi, who was close to the so-called reformist faction.

The Khatami period saw the graduation of the first generation of ISU PhD students and the return to Iran of the university's first cohort of Western-educated students. ISU began to employ these doctorate graduates, like Tavakol Habibzadeh, who became part of ISU's teaching faculty after receiving his doctorate from the University of Strasbourg.⁵⁰ Other Iranian universities started to employ these graduates, too, as senior faculty members, such as Mohammad Bagher Khoramshad, who, after obtaining his PhD in France, returned to Iran and became a senior faculty member of the Allameh Tabataba'i University.

Over the eight years of Khatami's presidency, ISU was able to replace almost all of its Western-oriented academic staff with its own graduates to consolidate the homogeneous, hardline ideological atmosphere its founders had desperately sought to achieve.

THE AHMADINEJAD YEARS, 2005–2013: THE IMAM SADEGHIS' GROWTH STAGE

The presidency of Ahmadinejad, a hardline zealot and member of the Basij, Iran's volunteer civil militia, opened up new horizons for the *Imam Sadeghis*, providing them with an open door into the conventional state bureaucracy. Whereas the Khatami era brought about the emergence of the *Imam Sadeghis*, the period under Ahmadinejad can best be described as their growth stage.⁵¹

Ahmadinejad's commitment to *taahhod* (ideological commitment) over *takhasoos* (technical expertise) would shape the *Imam Sadeghis'* growth. The new president set out to cleanse Iran's technocracy by awarding key positions in the state bureaucracy to members of the IRGC, the Basij and the *Imam Sadeghis*.⁵² Aided by the hardline president's support, the *Imam Sadeghis* became entrenched in Iran's key ministries – in particular, those of higher education, economy, foreign affairs and culture – and state bureaucracy.

One of the first ministries that was opened to the *Imam Sadeghis* was the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, which oversees the supervision of higher-education institutions across Iran. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, most directorate and managerial positions in the ministry were awarded to ISU graduates. In turn, they seized the opportunity to use the ministry's authority to appoint and dismiss senior faculty members in Iranian universities to embed ISU graduates across leadership roles. This move was aimed at taking control of Iran's higher-education system from within.

Ahmadinejad also appointed two *Imam Sadeghis* as deputies for culture and social affairs: first, Khoramshad and, later, Gholamreza Khajeh Sarvari, another ISU graduate. These appointments had a major impact in terms of further Islamising universities and eradicating Western influences while increasing restrictions in Iran's already closed university environment. For example, Khoramshad clamped down on several student organisations under the premise that they were "liberal" and working against the regime.⁵³

As part of the push to Islamise Iranian universities, this period saw the construction of mosques, Islamic seminaries and even martyrs' campuses aimed at nurturing hardline Islamist values. The authorities also promoted

chastity among students by enforcing the wearing of the proper hijab, prohibiting women from wearing make-up and intensifying gender segregation.⁵⁴ Khoramshad and Khajeh Sarvari did not hold back in highlighting their ideological ambitions and explicitly outlined plans to make Iranian universities the basis of an “Islamic civilisation”.⁵⁵

ISU economics graduates became the de facto first choices for economics-related technocratic postings, such as in the Securities and Exchange Organisation, Iran’s financial supervisory authority. The foreign ministry also embraced the *Imam Sadeghis*. As trusted hardline ideologues who had undergone intensive indoctrination at university, ISU graduates in this period occupied the roles of Iran’s cultural attachés to France, Italy and Turkey.⁵⁶

ISU graduates took on senior managerial roles in Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, where they occupied influential positions like director-general of the ministry’s Office of Books and Book Reading, responsible for censorship and approval of literature; director of the Research Centre for Culture, Art and Communication; and director-general for culture and Islamic guidance in Tehran province. These postings enabled ISU graduates to collaborate with their affiliates across Iran’s state media to aid the regime’s efforts to further Islamise media, arts and culture in the country and clamp down on Western and un-Islamic influences.

Falling short of a cabinet role, the most senior position obtained by an *Imam Sadeghi* in this period was secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council and lead nuclear negotiator, which went to Saeed Jalili.⁵⁷ As one Iranian journalist described, in this period, “It was enough just to mention the name ‘Imam Sadegh University’ and the doors would open and the position would be secured”.⁵⁸ While holding onto the gains made under Khatami in the realms of strategic communications, Ahmadinejad’s presidency for the first time opened up Iran’s policymaking machinery to the *Imam Sadeghis*, providing them with a degree of control over policy implementation and management.

At the same time, the *Imam Sadeghis* continued to expand their monopoly over Iran’s media industry. Between 2005 and 2013, the ISU cohort occupied executive and senior management roles at a significant number of Iranian newspapers and news agencies, including Tabanak, Raja News, *Iran Newspaper*, *Donya-e Eghtesad*, *Keyhan*, *Hamshari* and *Javan*.⁵⁹ This expansion, as well as the *Imam Sadeghis*’ entrenchment across IRIB, had a major impact on increasing restrictions and censorship in Iran’s already closed media environment.

Khamenei's Intervention to Transform the Bureaucratic System

The rise of the *Imam Sadeghis* was further consolidated in the early years of Ahmadinejad's second term in office, from 2009 to 2013, after a direct intervention by Khamenei. In April 2010, the supreme leader declared "transforming the bureaucratic system" (*tahavol-e nezam-e edari*) to be a major priority and set out his vision for the regime's technocracy in a document entitled "General Policies for the Bureaucratic System".⁶⁰

The two major themes that ran throughout this blueprint were the inefficiency of the Islamic Republic's workforce and the importance of creating a technocracy based on ideological-religious credentials. Among other things, Khamenei called on the government to:

1. institutionalise an organisational culture across Iran's bureaucracy based on Islamic values;
2. install and promote managers on the basis of knowledge and merit in relation to Islamic attitudes and morality; and
3. build a knowledge-based administrative system, applying the principles of knowledge management and integration of information, rooted in Islamic values.⁶¹

Recognising the need to reverse state mismanagement but deeply suspicious of Western-oriented technocracy, this blueprint was Khamenei's formal plan to back the rise of ideological technocrats in the system. The supreme leader's call on Ahmadinejad to implement this vision led the president to reduce the size of the Iranian bureaucracy while injecting an influx of *Imam Sadeghis*. However, the implementation of this vision came to an abrupt pause after Ahmadinejad's relationship with Khamenei began to sour from 2011 onwards.

ROUHANI'S PRESIDENCY, 2013–2021: EXCLUSION AND RE-EMERGENCE

Rouhani's victory in the 2013 Iranian presidential election would reverse many of the gains the *Imam Sadeghis* had made in government during the Ahmadinejad years. Rouhani had aligned himself with the so-called reformist elite faction in the Islamic Republic and sought to revive the clerical-technocratic alliance of the second decade of the Islamic Revolution.

Like Rafsanjani, Rouhani prioritised *takhasoos*, and as a result, the overwhelming majority of senior technocratic positions in his administration were awarded to Western-educated and -influenced experts. This led to an influx of US-educated Iranian policymakers during Rouhani's eight years in office, including Zarif, Mohammad Nahavandian, Salehi and even outsiders such as Kaveh Madani. By the end of 2013, Rouhani's cabinet had more holders of American PhDs than the cabinets of France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and Spain combined.⁶²

Naturally, the exclusion of ISU graduates, who by this point were widely recognised as aligned with the most extreme and hardline factions in the Iranian system, resulted in their mass exodus from both senior and mid-level technocratic positions in the government and the conventional bureaucracy. Of course, there were some exceptions. For example, Hosamoddin Ashna, an ISU communications graduate and a high-ranking member of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, positioned himself in Rouhani's inner circle and became one of the new president's advisors. But like Ramazanzadeh, Ashna did not represent ISU's homogeneous ideology and was among the first generation of *Imam Sadeghis* who had graduated under the influences of Western-oriented lecturers. Ashna's alignment with the so-called reformist faction in the Islamic Republic's elite was a consequence of this background.

While the exclusion of the *Imam Sadeghis* disrupted their trajectory towards elite status, in many ways the setback was minor, as their departure from the government and the conventional bureaucracy did not result in them being sidelined from the system. Rather, Rouhani closing his door on the ISU cohort led to the hardline clerical establishment opening its door – a move that would further consolidate ISU's elite status as a bulwark against the so-called reformist faction.

Imam Sadeghis were appointed across the Islamic Republic's unconventional bureaucracy in institutions run by the hardline Islamist establishment, such as the Expediency Council, the Guardian Council and Astan Quds Razavi, a Khamenei-run ideological-charitable foundation. Thus, for example,

Khajeh Sarvari was replaced as deputy for culture and social affairs in the science ministry, which oversees higher education, but then appointed to a managerial role in Astan Quds Razavi. Similarly, Khoramshad, who was among ISU's rising technocrats, having become the head of the culture ministry's Islamic Culture and Communication Organisation under Ahmadinejad, left the government to become secretary of the Khamenei-run think tank, the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran.



The Imam Sadeghis' Coming of Age

By the time Rouhani assumed the presidency in 2013, ISU had finally been able to nurture the pure, hardline Islamist campus environment to which its leadership had always aspired. This journey had taken the university just over three decades, during which time it doubled down on its admissions process, replaced most of its Western-oriented academic staff and increased its students' ideological-religious training.

These efforts paid dividends, as the third and youngest generation of *Imam Sadeghis* are among the most extreme hardline Islamist graduates the university has produced. As Seyed Mojtaba Emami, ISU's vice-chancellor for research, has asserted, "The composition that the Imam Sadegh University reached in the third generation could not have been [reached] in the first generation."⁶³

Despite their young age and lack of practical experience, the ideological commitment of the members of the third generation was quickly recognised by Khamenei and his close circle, resulting in their rapid rise to some of the most sensitive posts in the system. The surprise appointment in 2018 of 29-year-old ISU graduate Ali Foroughi as head of IRIB 3, the most viewed and most sensitive Iranian state television channel, is a prime example of this quick rise.⁶⁴ Before this role, Foroughi's only practical experience was heading the radio and television centre of the Basij. It was Foroughi's ISU affiliation and overt ideological conviction that gained him the new appointment.

The same can be said of Javad Ramazannejad, who was appointed head of Iran's Channel 5, as well as the young Vahid Yaminpour and Vahid Jalili, the younger brother of Saeed Jalili, both of whom were given posts as presenters and policy directors at the IRGC-affiliated state television channel IRIB Ofogh. Similarly, the fast rise of Meysam Motiee, a 32-year-old ISU graduate, as one of Khamenei's personal *maddahs* (religious singers and eulogists) reflected the supreme leader's confidence in the ideological-religious training Motiee had undergone at ISU.

It did not take long for the *taahhod* of these rising *Imam Sadeghis* to surface. They began to willingly use their positions and capabilities to propagate the regime's hardline Shia Islamist ideology and attack those they considered outsiders and enemies. For example, in 2020, Foroughi shut down the most popular programme on Iranian state television, the football show *Programme 90*, because of its outspoken presenter, Adel Ferdosipour, whom the hardline clergy and the IRGC had always regarded as an "anti-regime revolutionary".⁶⁵ According to a former head of IRIB, the Office of the Supreme Leader had long sought to shut down *Programme 90*, a desire that would be realised only with Foroughi's appointment as head of IRIB 3.⁶⁶

Similarly, Yaminpour used his platform to smear the foreign-based Iranian women's rights activist Masih Alinejad, calling her an "apostate" and a "prostitute".⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Motiee used his first eulogy in front of Khamenei to slam the US and attack Rouhani for his lack of support for the resistance axis.⁶⁸

At times, the *taahhod* of the *Imam Sadeghis* would spiral out of control, giving a flavour of just how zealous this cohort really is. Such was the case with Ramazannejad, who in 2019 used insulting and abusive sectarian language towards Sunni Islam and its early caliphs live on air.⁶⁹ Although this outburst led to his dismissal from Channel 5, Ramazannejad was later rewarded by being appointed head of Iran's state television, film and series production company, Sima Film. In fact, he was appointed specifically because of his ideological credentials and was tasked with a "mission to convey the knowledge and goals of the Islamic Revolution" to Iranian producers.⁷⁰

Just as Iran's hardline clerical establishment used the IRGC as the vanguard against the so-called reformist movement in the early 2000s, resulting in the Guard consolidating its elite status in the political arena, so from 2013 onwards, the *Imam Sadeghis* began to shine in the eyes of the hardline clergy and the IRGC. This dynamic led to the emergence of an informal alliance between the Office of the Supreme Leader, the IRGC and the *Imam Sadeghis* – a partnership that would crystallise under Raisi.

The Supreme Leader's 40-Year Manifesto: The Second Phase of the Islamic Revolution

The most significant turning point for the *Imam Sadeghis* during the Rouhani years took place in February 2019, when Khamenei unveiled his manifesto for the next 40 years, entitled “The Second Phase of the Islamic Revolution”.⁷¹ This document is perhaps the single most important blueprint for the Islamic Republic’s direction of travel in the coming decades.

As in his 2010 intervention, Khamenei dedicated significant attention in his 2019 document to transforming the bureaucracy as an urgent priority. Specifically, he called on the technocratic system to be based on three key principles:

1. talented, efficient and religious manpower;
2. revolutionary views and jihadi action; and
3. the presence of young people in various fields.⁷²

Only one institution in the Islamic Republic satisfies these criteria: ISU.

The “Second Phase” manifesto was a de facto signal from the supreme leader for the emergence of the *Imam Sadeghis*.

RAISI’S NEW ELITE ALLIANCE: THE OFFICE OF THE SUPREME LEADER, THE IRGC AND THE IMAM SADEGHIS

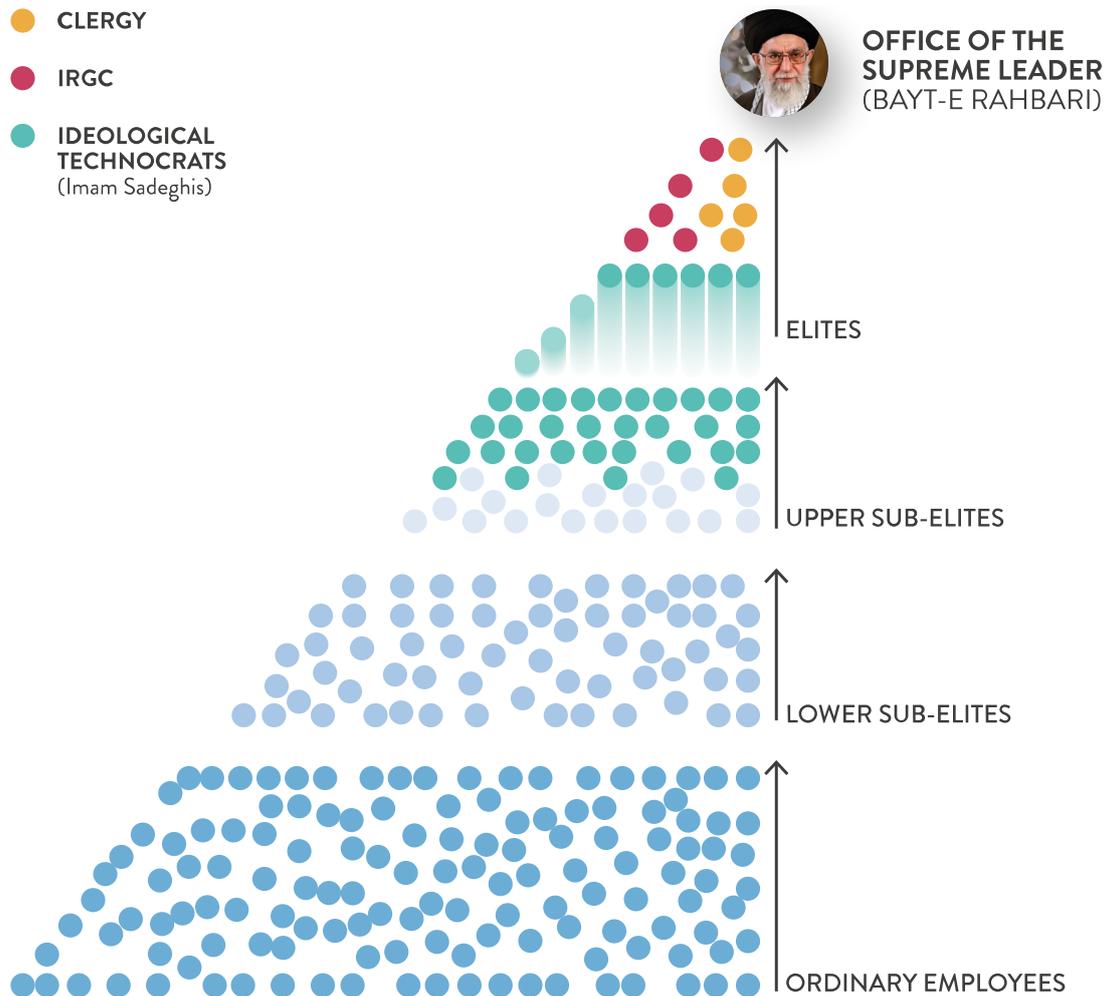
“The government’s plan is transformation and will be based on the [supreme leader’s] Second Phase of the Islamic Revolution”, asserted Raisi in his first press conference as Iranian president on 3 August 2021.⁷³

Less than two months after his election – a de facto appointment – the new president was making it clear that he would use the *Imam Sadeghis* to operationalise Khamenei’s ambition to transform Iran’s bureaucracy. As Raisi declared in October 2021, “Having a jihadist and revolutionary spirit among all government officials and managers is an important and effective principle and must always be seriously maintained and strengthened.”⁷⁴ This stance has resulted in Raisi handing effective control of Iran’s bureaucracy to the *Imam Sadeghis*, from cabinet positions to key roles across Iran’s conventional bureaucracy, such as the appointment of Khoramshad as the political deputy of the interior ministry.⁷⁵

In doing so, Raisi – with Khamenei’s full support – has altered the elite equilibrium in the Islamic Republic, opening the upper echelons of power for the first time to the country’s new ideological technocracy in the form of the *Imam Sadeghis*. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran’s elites were dominated mostly by the clergy and the Revolutionary Guard. Due to a lack of trust, traditional technocrats, who were Western-educated or influenced, were deliberately kept at the upper sub-elite level, below elite status. This is changing as a result of the rise of the ideological technocrats. Now, the Raisi government is effectively a tripartite alliance between the radical clergy affiliated with the Office of the Supreme Leader, the IRGC and the *Imam Sadeghis* (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

THE ELITE STRUCTURE IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC AND THE RISING IMAM SADEGHIS



Given the problematic relationship the clerical establishment has had with Iran's technocrats, the rise of the *Imam Sadeghis* to elite status is an indication that Khamenei now believes he has successfully Islamised a part of the Iranian system that was once regarded as a fifth pillar of Western influence. In essence, Raisi has recognised the emergence of the *Imam Sadeghis* from the crucible that fused *taahhod* with *takhasoos* and, in so doing, resolved the hardline clergy's difficult relationship with the technocratic class. Through the *Imam Sadeghis*, Khamenei and his circle believe they have finally been able to produce Islamist zealots who have the technical expertise to run an Islamic state and can therefore deliver the next stage of the Islamic Revolution. Of course, it is important to highlight that the hardline clergy – through the Office of the Supreme Leader – still maintains an upper hand in this new tripartite alliance.

Still, over four decades after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the rise of the *Imam Sadeghis* across Raisi's administration indicates ISU's success in achieving its objective to "create the future policymakers of the regime".⁷⁶ But in many ways, ISU's journey has only just begun. Since launching his 40-year manifesto in February 2019, Khamenei has sought to renew his predecessor's idea that the Islamic Revolution offered an alternative model of governance to the West's liberalism and the East's communism. As Khamenei asserted in his manifesto, the "Islamic Revolution should be compared with other great revolutions".⁷⁷

Through the *Imam Sadeghis*, Khamenei and his circle believe they have finally been able to produce Islamist zealots who have the technical expertise to run an Islamic state and can therefore deliver the next stage of the Islamic Revolution.

Khamenei and his close allies have put past failures in achieving this objective down to state mismanagement caused by those not committed to the Islamic Revolution. But having now purified the system, the 82-year-old

ayatollah is seeking to rejuvenate the concept of the Islamic Republic as an expansionist, idealist model of governance for Muslim lands and an alternative to the Washington and Beijing models.

As a step in this direction, in August 2019, Khamenei established the Islamic Republic's School of Governance of Shahid Beheshti within the University of the Armed Forces, with the formal objective to "train current and future rulers at the national and transnational level and across the Islamic world".⁷⁸ The school and ISU have been tasked with theorising and conceptualising what the regime calls transcendent governance (*hokmrani-e motaali*). The regime defines this concept as follows:

A way of governing that is based on a divine value system such as Islam to achieve the worldly happiness of the people in a geographical area or wider areas ... According to the theory of transcendent rule, the government belongs to God and only He can rule over man, because rulers have legitimacy as long as they have self-cultivation and acceptance and are the only executors of divine commands.⁷⁹

This is the Islamist model that Iran's Islamic Republic seeks to export to the Muslim world.

Implications for Iran, the Region and the West

The rise of the *Imam Sadeghis* to elite status in Iran's clerical system is significant. It is a clear indication that the Islamic Republic and its policy positions are becoming more ideological, in terms of both domestic and foreign policy ambitions.

Iran's new technocrats have all undergone the same kind of ideological-religious indoctrination as the hardline clergy and the IRGC. Washington – and the West more broadly – must be careful not to fall into the trap of viewing Iran's technocrats as the pragmatic forces in Raisi's administration. The West has typically viewed Iran's technocratic class as the pragmatic, nonideological branch of the clerical regime, as opposed to the IRGC's zealous ideologues in uniform. While this may have been true in relation to the old cohort of Iranian technocrats, it no longer applies in the case of the *Imam Sadeghis*. Although observably nonmilitaristic, the *Imam Sadeghis* are just as ideological as the IRGC, having undergone rigorous selection processes and extensive indoctrination.

The hardline ideological mindset of Iran's new technocrats is already starting to surface, in stark contrast to the Western-oriented bureaucracy of the past. For example, speaking at the School of Governance of Shahid Beheshti in September 2021 about the concept of Iranian governance, Latifi declared, "We have a problem with the Western model, which defines governance based on nation-states, as our model of governance [rejects the nation-state] and is based on the Imam and the Ummah."⁸⁰

This Shia Islamist worldview, which rejects the nation-state and instead divides the world between the lands of Muslims and those of infidels, is the foundation that drives the expansionist Islamist policies of the IRGC and Iran's hardline Shia clergy at home and abroad.⁸¹ The fact that this worldview is now being echoed by a senior Iranian technocrat – something that would have been unimaginable in the past – reveals the ideological nature of the new technocratic cohort.

Domestically, the rise of Iran's ideological technocrats will mean that state bureaucrats prioritise grand ideological objectives over the domestic needs of the Iranian population. This will result in the further neglect and deterioration of Iranians' social and economic well-being. Through election engineering at the presidential and the local level as well as the IRGC and the *Imam Sadeghis*, Khamenei seeks to achieve an idealist Islamic society as a prerequisite to the grand ideological objective of an Islamic civilisation that he can export.

As a consequence, observers can foresee a new wave of domestic Islamisation that will aim to eradicate the non-Islamic identity of Iranian society.⁸² As Latifi has asserted, "Our theory [of governance] is that of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil (*amr be maroof naahi az monkar*) ... This concept is not an additional phenomenon, it is fundamental."⁸³ This emphasis on ideology will increase pressure on Iranian society, resulting in greater domestic oppression and more brain drain because of further emigration to the West.

The new alliance between the hardline clergy, the IRGC and the *Imam Sadeghis* will also have significant implications beyond Iran's borders. The ideological synergy among these three elite powers will lead to greater coordination between Iran's ministries and the IRGC. This, in turn, will result in more bureaucratic support – in terms of both financial resources and manpower – for the Guard's external ambitions, blurring the lines between the diplomatic and military domains.

The fact that Khamenei has been able to indoctrinate Iran's technocracy through the *Imam Sadeghis* will allow the technocrats to proactively pursue ideological policies abroad in lockstep with the IRGC. This move increases the chances that any money allocated to the regime through sanctions relief as part of a possible US re-entry into the 2015 nuclear deal will be dedicated to meeting ideological objectives at home and abroad – not least, regional militancy – rather than to solving Iran's economic problems. In short, the rise of the *Imam Sadeghis* into technocratic positions makes an acceptable nuclear deal less likely.

The West must familiarise itself with this rising elite in Iran to be able to foresee the regime's future direction of travel. This is crucial before the US makes a decision on re-entering the 2015 nuclear deal, a move that would release \$90 billion in sanctions relief for Raisi, the IRGC and the *Imam Sadeghis*.⁸⁴

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