



## Why did Ayatollah Khomeini agree to drink from the poisoned chalice? A look at the constraints and considerations that influenced Khomeini in his historic decision to end the war with Iraq—a strategic turn in Iran’s policy—and its relevance to our times<sup>1</sup>



Ayatollah Khamenei (right). Will he be forced to follow the example of his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini (left), and drink from the poisoned chalice? (khamenei313.blogfa.com)

### Overview

1. **On July 17, 2012**, Iran commemorated the anniversary of the decision made by Iran’s former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to agree to a ceasefire with Iraq. **It was a historically significant decision** and a **strategic departure** from Khomeini’s previous stance, which was that the war had to continue until Iraq’s defeat. Khomeini’s strategic decision, which brought an end to the eight-year war between the two countries, was made on the basis of U.N. Security Council Resolution 598 from 1988.

<sup>1</sup> This is a follow-up to our July 26, 2012 Information Bulletin: “Will Iran’s Supreme Leader once again be forced to drink from the poisoned chalice? Iran’s media has recently focused on Ayatollah Khomeini’s agreement to the ceasefire with Iraq in 1988. The media discourse, which expresses unequivocal support for Khomeini’s decision, may indicate an understanding in Iran that the country’s leadership may be required to make another strategic decision on the nuclear issue”.

2. The anniversary of Khomeini's decision was marked by an extensive and rather uncharacteristic discourse by Iran's media on his agreement to the ceasefire. Top regime officials, including Iran's current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, expressed their **support for the difficult decision made by Khomeini** and provided explanations to the turn in Khomeini's stance and Iran's policy. Supreme Leader Khamenei and other members of the Iranian leadership argued that the turn had been largely **the result of domestic reasons, chiefly the economic problems** brought on by the sustained fighting, which put Iran in a difficult position and **caused considerable suffering to its citizens**.

3. With that in mind, we attempted to look into the **historic reasons which, at the time, led to Ayatollah Khomeini's decision**. Granted, what we may learn will not necessarily be pertinent to the present circumstances and the set of considerations which guide Khamenei, who directs Iran's policy in a completely different strategic environment than that of Khomeini, his predecessor. And yet, an examination of the reasons behind Khomeini's decision **may offer us a glimpse into a better understanding of the set of constraints and considerations that influence** the Islamic regime in Tehran—which regards Khomeini as its role model—should the time come for it to make a difficult strategic decision that would mean a **sharp turn in policy** (or “drinking from the poisoned chalice”, as Khomeini once put it).

4. We examined the reasons behind Khomeini's decision from **two perspectives**: the way they were portrayed **by Khomeini** in his letter to top regime officials, and the reasons indicated by **historians** who studied the Iran-Iraq War. These two (highly consistent) perspectives show that **the main reason behind Khomeini's decision was the difficult military situation brought on by the defeats Iran suffered on the battlefield of the war against Iraq**. For Iran, these defeats meant losing territory it had conquered in Iraq, sustaining severe damage to its infrastructure, suffering massive casualties, and experiencing a decline in public morale. This brought Khomeini to believe that **the Islamic regime in Iran was facing a no-choice situation**, since the fighting, had it persisted, **could have jeopardized its very survival**. Even though Iran's economy was badly hit by the war and the country found itself under international pressure, it is our impression that these were all **secondary reasons** for the difficult decision made by Khomeini.

5. These insights are different than those **presented by the Iranian leadership in the media discourse** that took place on the anniversary of Khomeini's decision. The focus in the statements made by Khamenei and other top officials was on the

**economic problems** that had faced Khomeini and the day-to-day difficulties experienced by the Iranian people, playing down the difficult military situation and the low morale. It is our assessment that shifting the focus from the military defeats to the economic difficulties was primarily intended to cast Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic republic and Khamenei's role model, in a positive light, as a leader who cared about the needs of his people and did not yield to external pressure, and to stave off criticism that his leadership brought Iran to the precipice of collapse.

6. Are these insights relevant to the currently prevailing approaches within the Iranian leadership on the way Iran needs to contend with the pressure exerted by the United States and the West—and if so, to what extent? In our assessment, the precedent set by Khomeini's decision—a significant turn in Iran's policy which contradicted his previous strategy and even ideological stance—may be used at some point by Khamenei and the Iranian leadership, if and when the regime believes that its policy is in a dead end and that its survival is at stake. On the other hand, Khamenei and the hardliners may be encouraged by the fact that Iran's current situation is still much better than the predicament the country was facing in 1988 after eight years of exhausting fighting with Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

7. The following three appendices deal with various aspects of Khomeini's decision:

- i. The chain of events that led to the cessation of fighting between Iran and Iraq
- ii. The reasons for Khomeini's decision according to a letter he sent to top regime officials
- iii. The reasons for Khomeini's decision according to literature on the Iran-Iraq War

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the various approaches, see [“Will Iran's Supreme Leader once again be forced to drink from the poisoned chalice?”](#)

## Appendix I

### The chain of events that led to the cessation of fighting between Iran and Iraq<sup>3</sup>

1. **On July 17, 1988**, Iran's President Khamenei sent a letter to U.N. Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, **asking for a ceasefire** in the sustained fighting between Iran and Iraq. The letter stated, "We have decided to officially declare that the Islamic Republic of Iran – because of the importance it attaches to saving the lives of human beings and the establishment of justice and regional and international peace and security – **accepts Security Council Resolution 598.**" According to a media report, the Iranian decision to accept the ceasefire was made after an eight-hour meeting to which Khomeini had summoned forty top regime officials.

2. **Iraq did not accept Iran's first ceasefire proposal**, saying that it was too vague and that **Khomeini did not publicly state that he accepted the ceasefire**. To back up its statement, Iraq launched a new round of heavy strategic shelling on industry plants in Bandar-e Khomeini (an Iranian port city in the Persian Gulf situated near the border with Iraq) and in Ahvaz, **and once again attacked the nuclear reactor that was then being built in Bushehr**. Iran reacted with limited air raids near Al-Faw and in Kirkuk; however, **it had no sufficient military capabilities for an effective response** to the Iraqi offensive.

3. Iran was thus forced to go to the Security Council, which it had been boycotting for seven years. It was also forced to fulfill Iraq's demand of having the ceasefire publicly acknowledged by Khomeini. And so, **on July 20, 1988, Iran's Supreme Leader gave a speech on Radio Tehran from which it was understood that he accepted the ceasefire and agreed to some of the Iraqi demands**. In his speech, Khomeini stressed the difficulty in accepting the decision: "The acceptance of this issue is more bitter than poison for me, but I drink this chalice of poison for the Almighty and for His satisfaction... I would have preferred death and martyrdom instead...[but I was forced to accept the advice of] all the high-ranking military experts." Khomeini went on to threaten the United States and its allies: "I hereby warn the American and European forces to leave the Persian Gulf before it is too late and you are drowned in quagmires of death."

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<sup>3</sup> For a description of the historical circumstances, we refer to Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner's **The Lessons of Modern War - Volume II - The Iran-Iraq War** (Westview Press, 1990), the most important and comprehensive book written on the Iran-Iraq War.

4. Nevertheless, **Iraq did not accept the ceasefire at that point.** It was now demanding face-to-face talks on all aspects of the Iran-Iraq peace treaty. This resulted in three weeks of tough negotiations filled with small-scale military assassinations between Iran and Iraq. In this context, Iraq helped an armored column of the Mojahedeen-e Khalq, the main opposition to the Iranian regime, advance some 100-150 km into Iranian territory. However, the Iranians captured the Mojahedeen force, which sustained heavy casualties, and executed the prisoners. Finally, **on August 6, 1988**, pressured by the Security Council, the United States, most European countries, and Saudi Arabia, **Iraq agreed to the ceasefire. The fighting formally stopped on August 8, 1988, and the first round of U.N.-brokered peace talks between Iran and Iraq was launched on August 24.**

## Appendix II

### The reasons for Khomeini's decision according to a letter he sent to top regime officials

8. **On July 15, 1988**, two days before Iran's President Khamenei sent a letter to the U.N. secretary-general, **Imam Khomeini sent a letter to the then leaders of the regime**. In his letter, Khomeini listed the reasons and considerations that drove him to "drink from the poisoned chalice" and accept Security Council Resolution 598. At the time, the text of the letter was not made public. In late September 2006 the letter was released by Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani's office through Mehr News Agency (hereinafter: Khomeini's letter<sup>4</sup>) due to domestic Iranian considerations.<sup>5</sup>

9. In his letter, Khomeini specified the reasons for taking the decision to end the war. In particular, the letter emphasized **Iran's military weakness, as it was explained to Khomeini by the leaders of the army and the IRGC, who explicitly admitted that Iran stood no chance of achieving victory in the next several years**. Iran's difficult economic situation and the low morale of the Iranian public are mentioned in the letter as well, but it appears that they were not the main reasons behind the decision.

10. **The following are the main reasons for the decision as they appear in Khomeini's letter:**

a. The letter begins with the assertion that the military and the IRGC openly acknowledged that **the Islamic army of Iran would not achieve its victory on the battlefield any time soon**. In addition, the leaders of the regime as well as military and political officials believed that **continuing the war would not serve the interests of the regime**, particularly because Iran could not acquire "even a tenth" of the weapons supplied by Western and Eastern powers to Saddam Hussein. In this context, Khomeini mentioned **Iraq's extensive use of chemical weapons** and the lack of appropriate means in Iran to neutralize such weapons.

<sup>4</sup> This appendix is based on Khomeini's letter, which was posted on mehrnews.com in late September 2006 and translated into Hebrew by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center.

<sup>5</sup> In particular, an attempt made by Rafsanjani, after losing the 2005 presidential elections, to prove to his political opponents that he still had political force, which stemmed mostly from his close relationship with Khomeini and his access to documents which could hurt his opponents. The release of the document could also be seen as criticism of President Ahmadinejad's uncompromising policy on the nuclear issue. For details, see Raz Zimmt, "The Ayatollah Khomeini Legacy: serving internal political struggles in Iran", December 13, 2007 ([www.tau.ac.il](http://www.tau.ac.il)).

b. **Khomeini cited excerpts from a “disturbing letter” he had received from the IRGC chief** about three weeks before writing his own letter (the IRGC chief at the time of the Iran-Iraq War was Mohsen Reza’i). According to Khomeini, this letter was one of the dozens of reports he had received in the wake of the military defeats suffered by Iran. According to the letter, it was only if the army and the IRGC received appropriate equipment and were considerably reinforced (“to double the military and increase the IRGC sevenfold”) that offensive operations against Iraq could be launched in the far future (early 1993). Reza’i’s letter said that, in order for Iran to continue the war, it would need 350 infantry brigades, 2,500 tanks, 3,000 cannons, 300 war planes, 300 helicopter gunships, and to be able to manufacture weapons on a massive scale. Iran needed to have such capabilities ready in five years, until which point “no victories are in sight”. In addition, the IRGC chief added that “we need to [...] evict the Americans from the Persian Gulf (which we cannot)”.<sup>6</sup>

c. Khomeini went on to say that the then President Mir-Hossein Mousavi had given him a report prepared by the finance minister and the planning and budget minister, according to which **the regime’s economic situation and financial capabilities were “worse than zero”**. Khomeini noted that the military leaders were saying that the arms and ammunition Iran had lost in the last months of the war were equivalent to the entire annual budget of the IRGC and the army.

d. All of these factors, Khomeini said, **had a negative impact on the morale of the Iranian people**: “Our political decision-makers say that the Iranian people are **not as enthusiastic as before** about going to the fronts **because they have understood that there is no chance of achieving a speedy victory.**”

11. Given this set of circumstances, Khomeini noted in his letter that he was forced to accept God’s will and **make a difficult decision, which would be tantamount to “drinking from the poisoned chalice”**, in order to safeguard the Islamic republic. He also asked for a meeting to be held **to explain the meaning of accepting the ceasefire to the Iranian people**. Khomeini added (apologetically) that the regime leaders were taking the difficult decision “with their hearts full of love for Islam and the homeland, and with eyes that shed blood instead of tears.” Khomeini turned to God,

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<sup>6</sup> As part of the recent discourse on Khomeini’s decision, Mohsen Reza’i, the current chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, said that the main reason for accepting the ceasefire was the economic problems facing Iran and the suffering of the citizens. He said that reports from the front and the use of chemical weapons were additional reasons that pushed Khomeini to make the decision. **Reza’i’s portrayal of the situation is considerably different than that which appears in Khomeini’s letter.**

saying: “We accept the ceasefire for the sake of preserving your religion... [however, you, God] are witness that we will not compromise even for one second with America and the U.S.S.R. and with all the [other] powers in the world... **because a compromise with the superpowers and other powers would be like turning our back on our Islamic values...**”

12. At the end of the letter, Khomeini said that he was calling a meeting to discuss how to explain the acceptance of the ceasefire to the Iranian people. He warned top regime officials that **“hotheaded, extremist individuals”** may challenge his decision, which serves the interests of Islam, by **“flaunting revolutionary slogans”**. Accordingly, he instructed the regime leaders that their efforts from that point onward must focus on **justifying the decision to agree to the ceasefire**, warning that **“any deviant move” is forbidden in Islamic religious law (*haram*) and that it would “trigger a reaction”**.

## Appendix III

### The reasons for Khomeini's decision according to literature on the Iran-Iraq War<sup>7</sup>

13. The following are the main reasons that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to agree to the ceasefire which led to the end of the Iran-Iraq War:

**a. Iran's difficult situation on the battlefield:** from early 1988 onward, it seemed that **an Iraqi victory was imminent**. This was after numerous reversals of fortune in the war, in which Iraq would take the lead, Iran would push back the Iraqi offensive and advance, and so on and so forth. In 1987 the Iranians still had the initiative, but then came a turn in the war. In late 1987 Iraq's draft was at a record high and the size of its army was estimated at about one million troops. Iraq equipped itself with considerable numbers of Scud missiles from the U.S.S.R., purchased advanced equipment, and modernized its air force. On the ground, Iraq reclaimed Al-Faw and other areas near Basra that had been conquered by Iran, which suffered severe casualties in the process. In 1988 the Iraqis made frequent use of Scud missiles and launched ground offensives to hit **Iranian civilian infrastructure**. In June 1988 Iraq conducted a major offensive against Iran in Tehran and the Majnoon Islands, defeating the Iranian forces. **Iraq then drove the Iranian forces out of all the territories Iran had won since 1982, and it was clear that the Iranians were left with no ability to resist the Iraqi army**. Politically, Saddam Hussein made the Iranian decision easier by announcing on July 18, 1988, the anniversary of the Baath party's coming to power, that Iraq had no intention of controlling any territory in Iran.

**b. Iran's low morale as a result of the massive casualties:** in early 1988 there was a change in Iran's ability to continue the war, one of whose reasons was **the cumulative psychological effect of the heavy casualties Iran suffered during the war**. According to various estimates, 450,000-730,000 Iranians were killed and nearly one million were injured in the war (Iraq's losses were not as heavy, with 150,000-340,000 people killed). In 1987, as a result of the high number of casualties, Iranian popular support for the war began to erode and ideological zeal could no longer be counted on as a substitute for military

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<sup>7</sup> This appendix is based on Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner's book, as well as on the following: Anthony Cordesman, **The Iran-Iraq War and the Western Security 1984-87** (New-York: Jane's, 1987), pp. 122-143; Sharham Chubin and Charles Tripp, **Iran and Iraq at War** (London: Tauris, 1988), pp.123-138 (hereinafter: Chubin).

professionalism. Iran's offensives, which relied on popular warfare and revolutionary zeal, **were at no point conducted at a high operational level, and once the revolutionary zeal declined, losing the war seemed closer than ever.**

c.**The domestic opposition to the war:** the public criticism in Iran over the number of losses, the high costs of the war (particularly from bazaar merchants), and the mismanagement of the war all contributed towards the decision to accept the ceasefire, as did the dwindling revolutionary zeal. It appeared, at that point, that Khomeini had to choose between seeing the opposition grow, **which could have undermined the stability and survival of the regime**, and recognizing that the war ended in a failure or at least reached a stalemate. Khomeini preferred the survival of the regime.

d.**Economic difficulties:** there is no question that the economic consequences of the war were particularly severe for both sides. For Iran, the financial cost of the war was exorbitant, the kind that can bring down an entire economy: by the time the war ended, its total cost was estimated at **206 billion dollars**. The sum included losses incurred by the petroleum sector, non-petroleum GDP losses, military expenses, capital loss, and the destruction of installations and infrastructure. In the months prior to the outbreak of the war, Iran exported some 3 million barrels of oil per day. During the war, as Iran's oil facilities became the targets of Iraqi attacks, oil production was interrupted and the number dropped to less than one million barrels per day.<sup>8</sup> The heavy expenses of the war had an impact on the quality of life of Iran's residents, particularly starting in 1987, when inflation skyrocketed. The public criticism over the cost of the war intensified as well. **Some say that Iran was on the brink of economic collapse.** Others believe, on the other hand, **that Iran could have continued the war without suffering an economic collapse** because its revenues from oil exports paid for the expenses of the war. If that was the case, the Iranian leadership was apparently more concerned about the loss of revolutionary zeal resulting from the economic decline than about other aspects of economic damage.<sup>9</sup>

e.**The international pressure on Iran:** the Western pressure was manifested in the stabilization of U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf during the later stages of

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<sup>8</sup> Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi (ed.), **The Iran-Iraq War, New Weapons, Old Conflict** (Washington: A Foreign Policy Research Institute Series, 1983), pp. 55-64.

<sup>9</sup> Chubin, pp. 123-138.

the fighting and the imposition of an international embargo on Iran, particularly concerning weapons. In addition, Iran became increasingly isolated, both diplomatically and politically. The international pressure apparently played a role in Iran's accepting the ceasefire, seeing as Iran depended on the import of weapons and needed relationships with other countries in the world for that purpose. It seems, however, **that the international pressure was not one of the main factors that led to the decision**, particularly given the fact that Iran was able to obtain weapons from private companies across the globe even without the assistance of their governments.