

# CHAPTER

# 1



AYATOLLAH ALI KHAMENEI, the Supreme Leader of Iran, stared out the window of his limousine as Tehran drifted silently past the window. Dust swirled through the streets. Palm trees, their fronds dry and parched by the sun, moved stiffly in the hot breeze. The sidewalks were crowded with somber people trudging through their daily tasks.

Despite the insular life he led, Khamenei saw them—and not just that day. From the window of his residence at the Beit Rahbari compound, when he rode to the mosque on Friday for worship and prayer, and as he came and went about his daily business. He saw it. The dusty, dirty streets that once had been lush, verdant corridors of beauty. The sparse, listless clusters of two or three at the open markets, where once there had been teeming, thriving crowds. But now all around him there was only decay. And he felt

it was all directly attributable to Donald J. Trump, the president of the United States.

Not five years earlier, things were very different. Led by Barack Obama, the youngest man ever elected to the US presidency, the Americans had spearheaded an international effort to maneuver Iran away from its program of nuclear development. Khamenei had been reluctant at first, thinking it was merely another ploy of the West to keep Iran under the imperialists' thumb. But when his own negotiators became convinced they could obtain a workable arrangement—one that offered the *appearance* of compliance with world expectations, but enough ambiguity for continued clandestine nuclear activity, and removal of economic sanctions—Khamenei had allowed them to proceed. And they were magnificently successful. An agreement was reached. Money flowed to Tehran once more. Purchases long delayed had been made. Improvements in infrastructure had been well on their way to completion. The entire country seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. But then Barack Obama's term in office came to an end.

Donald Trump, the next American president, was a businessman from New York who took office with a very different outlook. As a staunch supporter of the Free Iran movement, Trump had stressed the need to revoke the deal with Iran and reimpose sanctions. Time and time again during his campaign for office he groused that the deal was a gift to Iran and a bad deal for the world. New negotiations were required. Renewed sanctions would

make that happen. Americans saw it as good policy.

Khamenei viewed the American stance as yet another attempt to humiliate his country and he wasn't one to suffer humiliation lightly. "They will know that soon enough," he mumbled to himself. "And they will rue the day they did this. Allah will avenge our cause."

Moments later the limousine slowed, then turned from the street and passed quickly through the gates at the Beit Rahbari compound. A crowd was gathered there and waved to him with genuine enthusiasm, a stark contrast to what he'd seen just a few blocks away. Khamenei waved back, mustering a smile as if greeting old friends, before the gates swung closed and the car wound its way along the drive toward the center of the compound.

As the car came to a stop outside the main building, Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian president, stepped forward and opened the rear door. He held it in place as Khamenei rose from the back seat and stepped out to the pavement by the curb.

"I am glad to see you, Supreme Leader," Rouhani bowed his head when he spoke and he meant it, too. Unlike many who pretended a reverential attitude, Rouhani was sincere. Of all Iran's politicians and religious leaders, Khamenei was truly his favorite.

Khamenei seemed not to notice the solicitous tone in Rouhani's voice or the posture of his body. In fact, he didn't seem to notice Rouhani at all except to speak with the assumption that Rouhani knew the comments were directed to him. "They are here?" Khamenei asked.

“Yes,” Rouhani replied. “Assembled and waiting.” Khamenei was already moving up the steps and Rouhani left the car, its door still standing open, to hurry after him.

“You did not tell them why they were summoned?”

Rouhani shook his head. “Not a word.”

“Very good.”

With Rouhani at his side, Khamenei made his way inside and up to a third-floor room reserved for working sessions with key government officials. About the size of a large conference room, it was on an interior hallway with no windows to the outside. In the center was a long table and at the far end there was a large chair that sat on a raised dais, placing it well above the others. Khamenei entered and walked toward it.

Everyone who'd gathered there—the room was packed that day—stood and waited until the Supreme Leader was seated. Rouhani took a seat next to him and once both men were settled in place, the others returned to their chairs.

After what seemed a long time, Khamenei began. “As you are well aware,” his voice was heavy and his cadence deliberate, “the Americans have chosen to cancel our previous agreement and once again impose sanctions against us such that the latest restrictions are even more severe than the first. This is no easy thing for our people to bear. All across the city and, indeed, throughout the nation, we see indications that these acts of aggression against us—and make no mistake about it, that is precisely what they are—we see indications that these acts of aggression are having a

decidedly ill effect on our people. The Americans are attempting to strong-arm us into accepting the rules of the infidels. But as difficult and reprehensible as all of that may be, their actions have placed us in an even far more dangerous position.

“Historically, the people of Israel have perceived us as their greatest enemy—the one nation in all of the Middle East with the will to destroy them. And they are correct. For a long time, their zeal against us has been kept in check by American presidents who have restrained the Israelis from implementing their desire to launch a preemptive attack on our most valued assets.

“Now, with this infidel Trump as the new American president, the Israelis have perceived a shift from the ways of the past to an American president who is far less inhibited in his support of them. They sense in him a new moment; a moment of opportunity opening to them. And that makes them very dangerous. Attacking us with a devastating first strike is no longer impossible for them as they expect a friendly American government will gladly support such a move.” Khamenei paused to look around the room, letting his eyes fall on each one before continuing. “This is a very dangerous time for us. They might very well do this thing they have wanted to do for so long, and the American masses might very well support them.”

Bijan Rasouli, the foreign affairs minister, spoke up. “Even the Israelis must know they cannot conquer us with military might! They haven’t the strength for an invasion, nor the air force to obliterate our military.”

“That is correct as to the Israelis,” Khamenei acknowledged. “But with American assistance, they can inflict great misery on us. Destroy our domestic economy. Set back our nuclear development by decades. And there are many US politicians who would like to do just that.”

Rouhani nodded in agreement. “Well said, Supreme Leader. Many in the United States think if they inflict enough misery on us, our people will rise up in revolt, as they did against the shah.”

Khamenei assented, “And they might, but we cannot allow that to happen. We have done much to please Allah. We cannot fail him now.” He paused a moment and sipped from a bottle of water, then continued. “I have called you here because, as I have said, this is a crucial moment for us. We must not cower or run from it, but rather turn this moment to our advantage. What the Jews perceive as their greatest advantage also might well be their greatest weakness. We must find that weakness and exploit it to the fullest.” He paused again, then turned to where the nation’s most powerful generals were seated. His gaze focused on General Mohammad Bagheri, commander of the general staff of the armed forces.

“General Bagheri,” he began. . .

Bagheri jumped to his feet and stood at attention in almost comical fashion. “Yes, Supreme Leader.”

“Your task is to produce a plan that will turn this moment against the Israelis and give us the strategic advantage we need.”

Bagheri immediately responded. “Yes, Supreme Leader.”

“Return to me in three days with a plan that will do that.”

Without saying more, Khamenei stood and everyone in the room rose with him. They waited in silence once again, while he made his way through the room to the door and disappeared down the hall.



Three days later, Bagheri and the Iranian generals returned to the room on that third floor of the main building in the Beit Rahbari compound. As before, Khamenei’s key advisors and officials were assembled. They all stood as Khamenei entered the room and took his place in the chair at the far end of the table. And they watched with rapt attention as Khamenei turned to General Bagheri. “You have something you wish to say to me?”

General Bagheri pushed back his chair and stood, then turned to face Khamenei and began. “As you have indicated before, this is a moment given to us by Allah. However, it is a moment for cunning, not brawn.”

Khamenei seemed intrigued. Several who were present that day later said he even smiled. “What do you have in mind?”

Bagheri cleared his throat. “As a preliminary matter, we must pre-position additional troops in Lebanon and Syria. This is a cautionary measure to ensure they are in position to prevent a ground assault by the Israelis against Hezbollah, in a potential Israeli response to what is coming. Having them in position in advance will give us additional options should events unfold in an

unforeseeable manner. We will deploy these troops incrementally and in ways that do not attract great attention to their arrival.”

Khamenei interrupted. “Our current strength in these countries is not enough?”

“It is sufficient for what we have been doing in the past,” Bagheri explained. “But not for what we may face as a result of our complete proposal.”

Khamenei thought for a moment, then gestured for Bagheri to continue.

“At the same time as we strengthen our troops in Lebanon and Syria, we will insert operatives into Israel—men who have been trained by our Revolutionary Guard but who have no traceable connections to us. Capable men who know how to do the things we ask them to do.”

Mahmoud Alavi, the intelligence minister, spoke up. “And how will this happen? The Israelis are quite vigilant against people of this nature.”

Bagheri looked suspiciously at Alavi. They had clashed before on questions of policy and military strategy. “We will use various means and methods.” Bagheri was guarded in his remarks and careful not to commit himself to anything specific. “Perhaps with the help of our Russian contacts we will send some as Russian Orthodox priests.”

Some in the room smiled at the mention of this—the very thought of a Shia Muslim, playing the part of a Christian priest to infiltrate the Jewish homeland.



“Or,” Bagheri added, “as diplomats from some of the countries that are friendly with us.” Several in the room took this more seriously and nodded their approval. “Or even posing as Jewish refugees exercising their right of free return.” Bagheri seemed to have overreached with that remark and some raised some eyebrows at that suggestion, but Khamenei nodded and seeing that he was not upset the others quickly nodded approvingly, too. “We can work the details of that out later,” Bagheri continued. “It will not be a problem.”

“If we begin inserting these men immediately, we can preposition dozens in a matter of weeks without calling attention to their arrival. These operatives will work to assist in the things that are to come—recruiting, informing, supplying, facilitating inside Israeli territory—using members of Hamas and Arab Israelis whom we know, and are waiting to assist us.”

Bagheri seemed to warm to his topic and spoke with confidence. “At the same time, and in preparation for what is to come, our operatives—and those whom they recruit to assist them—will create an air of tension regarding the Palestinians. Tensions that begin low but rise higher and higher to set the Israelis on edge. Creating a sense of foreboding, as if something big is in the offing but the Israelis will not know what that something is.”

Khamenei became. “And what is that *something*?”

Bagheri responded, “When all is ready, our operatives will launch five simultaneous attacks by Hamas from Gaza against Israel’s western border. These attacks will be disguised as Gaza

protests and will occur at the same time on the same day. A surge of thousands of people from Gaza moving toward each of the five border checkpoints. With the help of our operatives, these protesters will be instructed to cross the border at all costs to occupy land on the other side, thus ensuring they approach and surge through the checkpoints in an aggressive manner. Our operatives will make certain that women and children are at the front of those protest groups.

“By these great surges of humanity, and in the air of tension previously created, we will provoke IDF soldiers to shoot them at the border in an apparent attempt to stop them from crossing, as they did in previous protests. Only this time, the IDF will slaughter hundreds at each checkpoint. Thousands more will be injured. Thus, the casualty count will be five times higher than at any time in the past.

“Through our media contacts, we will make certain that international news agencies cover the events. Scenes of these actions will be broadcast around the world and presented in a light that portrays the Israelis as the evil oppressors we know them to be. We will make certain these reports are repeated through the news cycle for many days.”

Bagheri had their attention now and he knew it, which left him feeling pleased with himself. “At the same time, our operatives will facilitate a large protest by Israeli citizens—those who favor the cause of peace and freedom for our people. This protest will take place in Jerusalem, and will ensure a large crowd is

present in the streets of the city. On the day of the protest, we will infiltrate Jerusalem with children—perhaps a hundred or so, a group large enough to be effective but small enough to avoid raising suspicions. These will be Arab schoolchildren—old enough to be useful, young enough not to ask too many questions. They will spread out among the public, particularly in the Old City where streets are narrower and more confined. Many of the children will carry backpack bombs that can be remotely detonated. Others will carry only backpacks. But all of the children will appear the same—schoolchildren with backpacks. As the bombs are detonated around the city—some here—some there—more over here—then dozens more over there—the Israeli police will be provoked to take action. If we do this correctly, many of the policemen will react in fear and begin shooting at all children wearing backpacks, most of whom will be merely unarmed children with backpacks, not bombs.

“Through our various media contacts, we will make certain the international news agencies are present to broadcast all of this, in Gaza and in Jerusalem, to televisions and Internet devices around the world. As the images of slaughtered and wounded women and children are replayed again and again—in broadcasts and on social media—outrage will build among the citizens of the world. Sympathizers and politically liberal constituents in the West will make certain these news stories get repeated and that the dead children are not forgotten or overlooked.

“As global outrage builds, our friends at the United Nations

will call for sanctions against Israel. You will remember when President Ahmadinejad saw the green light at a UN meeting. He said no one in the room blinked for thirty minutes.” Bagheri’s cadence changed and many who heard him speak later said he sounded like one of the prophets of old. “Just as the Mahdi aided him, so he will assist us. All members of the Security Council will agree to those sanctions, including Russia. But the United States will come to Israel’s defense and veto those sanctions, promising support to the Jews and defending the Israeli government to news reporters.

“Then all the world will become outraged and all of the nations will demand justice on behalf of the slain Arab children. And instead of the United States bludgeoning the nations of the world to impose crippling sanctions against us, as they are now, the nations of the world will rise up against the Americans and impose sanctions against the United States.

“The European Union, China, perhaps even Russia will see this as their moment to turn the tables on the Americans. China, in particular, would welcome an opportunity to assert itself as the world’s leading economic superpower. They will jump at the chance to impose the severest sanctions. Sanctions that will amount to a virtual worldwide halt in trading with the US. Those sanctions will shock the American economy. Exports to and from the US will tumble, the US stock market will collapse, American consumers will stop consuming, and the American economy will fall to the ground.

“And when the American economy collapses from lack of international trade, and its allies abandon it to turn their allegiance to others, the once-mighty US military will no longer be free to roam the world imposing its will on us. Then we will be free to destroy Israel, once and for all. There will be no one to stop us!”

The room was quiet when Bagheri finished. Everyone sat in stunned silence. With all eyes fixed upon him, Bagheri slowly turned to face Khamenei, and bowed respectfully. “That, Supreme Leader, is the strategy we propose.”

“Very well,” Khamenei responded. “I will take the matter under advisement.” With nothing more, he rose from his seat at the table, made his way to the door, and was gone.

Bagheri gathered his things and followed the others from the room. Still, no one said a word to him or offered even the simplest greeting as they shuffled to the hall and made their way to the steps.

Though they did not speak or utter a word of praise in the presence of those who had attended the meeting, several generals—Kayhan Alizadeh from the army and Jalal Elahi from the air force, among others—accompanied Bagheri through the hall to the main corridor and down to the sidewalk outside the building. When they were safely away, General Alizadeh asked, “Do you think he will approve it?”

“No one can say for certain.”

“And what if the strategy does not succeed?”

General Elahi interjected, “If the strategy fails, it won’t matter.”

Alizadeh looked perplexed. “And why not?”

“Because,” Elahi replied, “if it fails, we will all be dead.”

The others chuckled self-consciously. “Relax,” Bagheri urged. “It will not come to that.”

“And if it does?”

“If it all falls apart, we always have the Mahdi option.”

Everyone smiled and nodded with a sense of relief. “Yes,” they all agreed, “We always have the Mahdi option.”

The following day, Khamenei issued a memo approving the plan proposed by General Bagheri. It was communicated to him by a courier who brought the memo in an envelope bearing the wax seal of the Supreme Leader.

Six months later, three operatives, specially selected by Bagheri and trained specifically for his purposes, arrived in Tel Aviv. Each held credentials and a passport from France, and a background on record as an executive from a medical technology company. Nothing about them gave even a hint that they had ties to anything Iranian. By the time they were settled, three more were on their way.