

Khamenei's Rare Friday Sermon Reflects Four Pressing Concerns

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Brief Analysis

Public anger is exploding over the regime's mishandling of the airline tragedy, and the Supreme Leader seems to realize that his normal methods of extinguishing unrest and exploiting election cycles may not suffice.

On January 17, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is expected to lead Friday prayers in Tehran, the first time he has done so in eight years. His decision to preside over the high-profile religious-political ritual comes amid new mass protests that erupted after the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps admitted it accidentally shot down a Ukrainian airliner last week. Previously, the regime had prevaricated on its responsibility for the incident, changing its tune only under heavy international pressure. Khamenei's focus is now turning to damage control ahead of next month's parliamentary election.

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF FRIDAY PRAYERS

Leading Friday prayers in the capital is a symbolically significant act usually reserved for moments when the Islamic Republic's highest authority wishes to deliver an important message to the people. The ritual's political (and theatrical) role is exemplified by the fact that the speaker is required to brandish a weapon in order to emphasize the state's military strength and uncompromising attitude toward its enemies.

According to the regime's ideology, the Supreme Leader enjoys exclusive authority over this ritual, including the freedom to lead it himself or entrust a representative to do so. Historically, leaders in the Islamic Republic and past caliphates have left this task to loyal clerics with outstanding oratorical skills. Khamenei's predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, never conducted the prayers himself, delegating them to various subordinates. In contrast, Khamenei has appointed six clerics as Tehran's "provisional Imams of Friday prayer" during his tenure, but without

giving up his own prerogative to fulfill that role when he deems it necessary.

Last time he delivered the Friday sermon, on February 3, 2012, Khamenei was responding to growing economic pressure at home and the government's decision to negotiate with Washington over the nuclear program. Among other messages, he delivered a warning about America's untrustworthiness: "We should not be deceived by the enemy's smile and false promises...In the beginning sometimes we tend to believe them, but gradually we realize what is behind the scenes...They break their promise with no shame." He also addressed issues relevant to the parliamentary election that took place shortly thereafter—a situation that holds for this week's remarks as well.

WHY TAKE THE PULPIT NOW?

When the IRGC announced last weekend that it was responsible for downing Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 three days earlier, people in Tehran and other cities took to the streets to express their resentment toward the regime—not only for causing the deaths of 176 passengers, but also for lying about the January 8 incident until pressure from Canada, Sweden, Ukraine, and other actors compelled a reluctant confession. Khamenei himself played a role in this whitewashing campaign, neglecting to even mention the crash in public remarks delivered after the incident.

Initially, the regime's focus was on waging a massive propaganda campaign to build on its ballistic missile attack against Iraqi bases housing U.S. military forces. That attack was launched hours before the accidental downing of Flight 752, and in retaliation for the U.S. assassination of IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani. Iranian leaders presumably believed that telling the truth about the crash right away would have undermined their efforts to exploit public anger at the United States for killing Soleimani, thereby ruining their revenge spectacle and discrediting the regime. Thus, rather than explaining the crash, state media broadcast images of Khamenei personally supervising the Iraq strike, portraying him as a strong, smart military leader who bravely acted against the enemy to protect his people.

Yet national mourning for Soleimani quickly turned to anger at Khamenei, a sentiment spurred by foreign revelations about the crash, contradictory statements from IRGC commanders and President Hassan Rouhani's government, and the regime's unwillingness to hold any high-ranking officials responsible for the tragedy. This drastic shift in public attitudes has largely spoiled the state's concentrated efforts to rally people behind Soleimani's assassination and **project an image of domestic popularity and power**

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-khamenei-speech-underlines-the-importance-of-popular-support-for-the-re>).

By leading Friday prayers in this charged environment, Khamenei may seek to address four main concerns. First, the regime now seems aware that its deceptive and disrespectful approach to the airline tragedy had the unintended effect of humiliating the victims' families, violating their dignity as citizens, and inciting shock and rage among Iranians of all ideological and political stripes. Many people who used to unconditionally support the regime's policies in the past are now finding it difficult to believe its claims and forgive its behavior, creating wide gaps among its social power base and ruling elite. And **unlike the gasoline protests**

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-gasoline-protests-regime-unpopular-but-resilient>) that broke out last November, the policy error that sparked the current unrest has proven irreparable so far.

For example, one video clip circulating widely on social media shows IRGC general Amir Ali Hajizadeh defending the regime's decision to keep the truth veiled for three days. In his view, if the government had announced its mistake earlier, it might have shocked military personnel and distracted them from their crucial duties at a time of acute confrontation with the United States. Such arguments have failed to quell the anger, however. Even if protests do

eventually peter out, the regime's core supporters will likely be left with a deep sense of perplexity and betrayal over the incident, both of which could be difficult to dispel.

Second, the regime hoped that its violent crackdown in November and its exaggerated funeral ceremonies for Soleimani earlier this month would convince protestors not to hit the streets again. Yet the airline tragedy rejuvenated people's will to march once again, not only to vent their anger over the incident, but also to reiterate their fundamental demands for change and denounce the Supreme Leader and IRGC. Several political figures have publicly called for Khamenei's resignation given his role as commander-in-chief of the military, including the Green Movement's Mehdi Karrubi and activist Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of the late president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Although the regime could repeat or even intensify its crackdown, that approach would come with a host of unpredictable consequences that might spark an even greater crisis. Therefore, the regime is facing a perilous dilemma—using large-scale violence could prove destabilizing, but inaction could have the same effect. Leading the Friday prayers may be Khamenei's way of seeking a middle path through this dilemma.

Third, the Supreme Leader likely fears that ongoing domestic crises and protests may boost hopes for regime change among Iran's "enemies," spurring them to intensify their political and economic pressure. In his view, such pressure would aim to force Tehran back to the negotiating table in a weakened position, or replace the regime with a more Western-friendly government. Therefore, he will likely do whatever is needed to end the protests, but without worsening what has become an embarrassing show of bitter divorce between nation and state.

Fourth, as a semi-totalitarian system, the Islamic Republic still needs to hold elections in order to "prove" its popularity and democratic legitimacy. Thus, Khamenei likely hopes to insulate next month's scheduled parliamentary vote from public anger over the airline tragedy. His Friday speech and subsequent actions will probably reflect this imperative, augmenting the regime's traditional machinery for manipulating and legitimizing electoral results. This machinery is already well under way—the Guardian Council has quietly followed its pattern of disqualifying large numbers of parliamentary candidates who do not sufficiently demonstrate their absolute loyalty to the Supreme Leader. And as election day draws nearer, the regime will manipulate additional mechanisms to support its claims of respectable voter turnout (i.e., above 50 percent).

Khamenei's Friday sermon could address all of these pressing concerns at once: namely, by emphasizing the "enemy's threat," the absolute primacy of security, and the IRGC's vital significance in protecting against this danger; by railing against the "unfair" international media campaign against the nation's guardians; by warning of U.S. plots and sabotage; by reiterating his refusal to negotiate in light of America's untrustworthiness; and by encouraging people to participate in the election. In contrast, he seems quite unlikely to make any gesture of humility or compromise toward his domestic or foreign adversaries. This defiant stance may include refusing to dismiss IRGC commanders over the airline incident, and perhaps even barring the judiciary from bringing them to justice.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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