

New Khamenei Speech Underlines the Importance of Popular Support for the Regime

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Brief Analysis

Instead of focusing on Iran's missile retaliation or future threats, the Supreme Leader used his latest speech to extoll the virtues of public unity behind the regime's revolutionary goals.

On January 8, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei delivered his first public speech since the U.S. assassination of Qasem Soleimani and the subsequent Iranian missile strike on Iraqi bases housing American forces. As part of an address that touched on regional solidarity against the United States and other notable subjects, he spent considerable time claiming that Soleimani symbolized the Iranian people's continued commitment to the revolution. In doing so, he indicated that popular support for the regime remains a crucial objective for Iran's leaders, perhaps more so than issuing or acting on further military threats.

CASTING SOLEIMANI AS THE MODEL REVOLUTIONARY

Addressing a group of citizens from Qom—which he does every year on the anniversary of the city's pre-revolutionary protests against the shah—Khamenei described the late Qods Force commander with a string of superlatives: “Martyr Soleimani was brave, wise, and competent in management...not only on the battlefield, but also in the political sphere...His words were influential, convincing, and above all, he was sincere; he used his bravery and wisdom as tools in the service of God, he was anything but a hypocrite.” Although the Supreme Leader acknowledged that Soleimani was “adventurous,” he argued that the commander was also “thoughtfully protective with regard to people around him, his soldiers and foreign colleagues.”

Khamenei went on to recognize Soleimani as a “revolutionary” who was strictly committed to religious rules: for example, “where using weapons was not permitted, he refrained from using them.” More broadly, he praised the

commander for being “selflessly devoted to the revolution,” for “seeing revolutionary principle and practice as his redline,” and for remaining above party or factional affiliations. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind what Khamenei means when he calls someone a “revolutionary”—namely, he is praising the person for being blindly faithful to the Supreme Leader’s will and commands. In his view, those who identify themselves as revolutionaries without showing the proper devotion to him (i.e., God’s representative on earth) should be exposed as frauds.

Khamenei also praised Soleimani’s role in furthering the regime’s goals in the Middle East: “Today I bow to him for what he initiated and brought about for this country, even for the region. It is a great achievement. His job was miraculous.” Other portions of the speech expanded on this theme: “By helping the region’s people and securing their assistance, he succeeded in spoiling all of America’s illegitimate plans” in countries such as Iraq, Palestine, and Syria. In particular, Khamenei celebrated the **impact Soleimani had on Lebanon** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-moment-of-truth>): “Thanks to God, Hezbollah became stronger and stronger, and today the group is Lebanon’s eye and hand. The role of our dear martyr in this is distinguished and extraordinary.”

Yet the Supreme Leader’s main focus was domestic. In addition to praising Soleimani’s revolutionary credentials, he noted that the commander’s death was a “blessing” of sorts because it brought out the same qualities in the Iranian public: “Certain people have portrayed the revolution as dead in Iran...but his martyrdom proved that the revolution is alive. Have you seen what happened in Tehran? In other cities?” The latter questions referred to the spectacular funeral ceremonies held for Soleimani in recent days, some of which grew so heated that dozens of mourners were killed in stampedes. Khamenei then blamed the “enemy” for designating Soleimani as a terrorist: “Unfair Americans, lying Americans, driveling Americans, whose words are nothing but worthless...Iranian nation, punch them in the face!”

REACTION TO THE U.S. ATTACK

Portions of Khamenei’s speech discussed the nature and purpose of Iranian measures taken after Soleimani’s assassination. “Last night, we slapped them on their face,” he boasted, referring to Iran’s ballistic missile attack against American facilities in Iraq. In his view, however, the broader goal of ending “America’s corrupting presence” is paramount: “They brought war to this region, disputes, seditions, destructions...They insist on doing the same to beloved Iran and our republic too. This issue of ‘negotiating’ and ‘sitting at the table’ and so on is just a prelude to intervention.”

Yet unlike the bellicose rhetoric he issued in other recent remarks, today’s speech made no explicit threat against foreign governments—not just the United States, but also Iran’s regional rivals. In fact, he delicately suggested that despite all of the rancor between Arab monarchies and Tehran, he does not categorize any of these states as enemies: “We should know the enemy. I would assertively say: the enemy means America [and] the Zionist regime.” He included both government actors and private companies in this category, lumping them together as “the world’s looters and tyrants and the like.”

He then offered a more explicit combination of olive branch and threat: “We do not regard regional or outside powers who have sometimes made remarks against us as our enemy. They are not enemies as long as they do not serve our true enemy against us in practice.” Such rhetoric is likely intended to leave an ambivalent impression on other Middle Eastern leaders: on one hand, it reassures them that Tehran has no intention of destabilizing their countries or harming their interests; on the other hand, it warns them against helping the United States or Israel execute plans to harm Iran—a broad formulation that could cover everything from military operations to financial sanctions.

EMPHASIS ON DOMESTIC LEGITIMACY

Khamenei's paean to the unique benefits of Soleimani's life and death also served as a way to remind listeners about the supposedly powerful bond between the Islamic Republic and its people. Recalling the stormy history of the 1979 revolution and subsequent years, he declared that Iran was able to prevail against its enemies not due to military strength, but through "empty hands" and hearts filled with faith in God. Although Iran is militarily powerful today, he argued that the best way to keep foiling its enemies is for the people to rely on their faith and determination: "Making the people doubtful is what the enemy is after, and if this happens, it would affect Iran's offensive and even defensive capability."

As an example of his claim that the enemy is constantly working to undermine Iran through political and economic plots, he pointed to [last November's gasoline protests \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-gasoline-protests-regime-unpopular-but-resilient\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-gasoline-protests-regime-unpopular-but-resilient). "In a small but really malicious and wretched European country," he said, "an American element along with a group of Iranian traitors and hirelings gathered to plot against the Islamic Republic, and their plans were implemented a few days later on the gasoline issue." (The country he was insulting is probably the Czech Republic, which hosts the U.S.-funded outlet Radio Farda; as for American officials meeting with Iranian opposition figures, that is a matter of public record, though Khamenei tends to use such contacts as fuel for far-reaching conspiracy theories.)

In short, Khamenei has once again attributed the past forty years' worth of Iranian "victories" to the spiritual strength of the ruling elite and the loyal ruled, while blaming all protests and anti-regime resentment on sinister actors abroad. At the same time, he sought to deliver a speech that would add to the theatrical effects of Soleimani's funeral ceremonies while restoring the regime's image as a popular state with no concern about a fatal domestic crisis. Finally, he aimed to show that the regime enjoys enough popular support not only to remain in power, but also to continue pursuing the regional policies that have provoked so much international discontent.

Such contortions are fascinating because they show that even in a deeply authoritarian state that has proven its willingness to crack down on dissent as violently as necessary, the Supreme Leader still feels a vital need to portray his regime as a popular one. This makes sense in practical terms because the government cannot rely indefinitely on the type of brutal coercion seen since November. Yet despite the pain he has experienced over Soleimani's loss and the unnerving pressures of the gasoline crisis, Khamenei seems confident that there is little chance of another deep domestic crisis reemerging in the near future. In his view, Soleimani's death will help prevent this, in part by further dividing the disorganized, leaderless opposition, and also by allowing the government to justify additional internal security measures now that the specter of war seems much more visible.

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

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