

Will Khamenei's Son Play a Role in Iranian Succession?

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Brief Analysis

Revived rumors about Mojtaba Khamenei's activities inside the regime provide another lens through which to view the complex dynamics that will drive the eventual succession process.

The following PolicyWatch is an excerpted, edited translation of a German-language article originally published in Neue Zürcher Zeitung newspaper (<https://www.nzz.ch/international/iran-der-sohn-des-revolutionsfuehrers-greift-nach-der-macht-ld.1597853>) on February 15, 2021.

The stability of dictatorial regimes is measured primarily by two factors: first, the leader's health and ability to exercise his/her office, and second, whether elites can manage the transfer of power to a successor in a smooth way that prevents destructive internal struggles. This is true for the Islamic Republic of Iran as well, behind whose republican facade a clerical Supreme Leader reigns supreme.

According to the religious interpretation of his followers, the absolute power in the Iranian state is the Supreme Leader, the so-called *rahbar*. It is the *rahbar* who exercises power on behalf of the Mahdi, the messiah awaited by Shia Muslims. The state of health of the current *rahbar*, eighty-two-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has been a mystery for years. So far, however, all rumors about his imminent demise have proven false. The only certainty is that he is suffering from prostate carcinoma, which is relatively treatable. Recent rumors claim that he may also be struggling with heart problems and water in the lungs.

A Claim to Leadership?

A growing number of reports from the Iranian opposition in exile argue that the Supreme Leader has been devolving more significant responsibilities to his son Mojtaba Khamenei—in particular, a large part of his authority in the regime's most important control center, the Office of the Supreme Leader. Meanwhile, in mid-January, photos and videos emerged on Iranian social networks purportedly indicating that the battle over Khamenei's succession has gained in ferocity. In some of the footage, columns of workers can be seen marching

along a key avenue in Tehran adorning lampposts, traffic lights, and electrical boxes with thousands of propaganda posters showing Khamenei and his son alongside the Arabic words “Labayk ya Mojtaba” (“Oh Mojtaba, we follow you!”). The religious formula *labayka*, familiar to every Muslim, is of high symbolic power and is usually spoken by Hajj pilgrims entering the holy city of Mecca as a gesture of devotion to Allah’s omnipotence and leadership.

According to further rumors, the reformers who dominate Tehran’s municipal administrative council acted quickly to counter this display. After instructing local police to tear down the posters, they purportedly had the marchers arrested and interrogated.

Who Is Mojtaba Khamenei?

Whatever the truth behind such stories, they raise an interesting question: what are Mojtaba’s actual qualifications for and chances of succeeding his father? Born in 1969 in Mashhad, he is the second-eldest of Khamenei’s four sons. He has never held a public office and has spent most of his time in the shadowy secret service apparatuses outside the glare of the public eye. This accounts for the fact that few biographical data about him are in circulation.

Among the four brothers, Masoud and Mostafa devote themselves mainly to religious studies in Qom and perform only minor political functions in their father’s office, but Mojtaba and his other brother Meysam are purportedly more engaged in behind-the-scenes political wheeling and dealing. Beginning in 1988, they both served in the armed forces for two years. Afterward, Mojtaba began his religious studies, first in Tehran and then, from 1999, in the seminaries of Qom, where he was a student of Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi.

Mojtaba thus fell under the spell of one of Iran’s most influential clerics, who made a name for himself as the theological-ideological patron and mentor of the ultra-hardliners, sparking numerous controversies due to his radical views. For example, before his death in January 2021, Mesbah-Yazdi called for the abolition of elected republican institutions and the transfer of parliamentary and presidential functions to the Supreme Leader, which would turn Iran completely into a totalitarian theocracy.

Yet Mojtaba’s religious studies did not go too far. To date, none of the leading grand ayatollahs in Qom have granted him a theological teaching license or the rank of ayatollah. If rumors are true, the reason he did not find more time for his studies is because he was deeply involved in building and expanding his father’s office.

When Ruhollah Khomeini died in 1989, the Office of the Supreme Leader consisted of about 80 employees, but by 2019 their number had risen to about 4,000. The office has become the center of a highly complex system of more than 100 organizations and sub-institutions. Its leaders are accountable only to the Supreme Leader, not to the government. Khamenei is constantly stabilizing this system through divide-and-conquer tactics and efforts to balance conflicting interests.

Within this labyrinth, Mojtaba has purportedly created two centers of power: an intelligence sector that encompasses seventeen agencies, and the propaganda apparatus, which includes state media and the influential directorate for Friday prayer imams. Some sources claim he has filled these centers with henchmen from around the same age group and has systematically used them to expand his influence.

Moreover, during the 2005 presidential election, Mojtaba reportedly convinced his father to support hardline candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. And when Ahmadinejad won a second term in 2009 by manipulating the election results, some claim that it was Mojtaba who organized the violent suppression of the resultant mass protests, with active support from Hossein Taeb, the Basij militia chief who would later become head of intelligence for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Some reports indicate that close cooperation with Ahmadinejad also paid off for Mojtaba financially, especially via

oil smuggling. For instance, a \$1.6 billion account that the British government seized in 2009 because of its links to the suppression of Iranian protests may have belonged to Mojtaba, though this claim has not been proven.

Prospects of Various Succession Candidates

Some names tend to come up repeatedly whenever the post-Khamenei succession is discussed. Two men who were promising contenders a few years ago are now considered to have no chance. One is current president Hassan Rouhani, who is viewed as a moderate. The other is the first Supreme Leader's grandson Hassan Khomeini, who is aligned with the reformers. The curator of the Khomeini shrine in Tehran, he draws on the nostalgic nimbus of his grandfather but does not have a significant power base.

As for Rouhani, while he can count on the influential Ministry of Intelligence as his strongest power base, he doubtlessly has lost enormous support among the population due to the frozen nuclear agreement. He promised a peace dividend from that agreement—saying it would boost an economy suffering under the burden of U.S. sanctions—but this failed to materialize, which in turn weakened his position among increasingly impoverished Iranians.

Two other candidates may be more promising. One of them is Ebrahim Raisi, who was appointed by Khamenei to head the judiciary in 2018 and is considered a clerical hardliner with good ties to the IRGC. The second is Sadeq Larijani, who served as head of the judiciary for ten years before Raisi. Since 2018, he has headed the Expediency Council, a body involved in the legislative process that has lost a great deal of its power and now serves as a shunting ground for jaded top politicians. Counted among the moderate conservatives, Larijani has a considerable power base among those Qom clerics who are loyal to the regime. Together with his four brothers, he also owns a massive corporate and real estate empire.

According to some sources, this empire has been a welcome target for Khamenei's son. With the help of the aforementioned Hossein Taeb, Mojtaba has allegedly been able to compile investigation dossiers related to white-collar crime and corruption, and he may have used this information to prod Raisi into launching a series of public trials last year against Larijani's closest associates, thereby increasing pressure on Larijani himself. Only a show of force by the Supreme Leader brought these judicial attacks to a halt, perhaps out of fear that the Larijani clan could become a threat if cornered. Nonetheless, Sadeq's succession credentials have since been regarded as tarnished.

As for Mojtaba's potential as a candidate, Khamenei has refrained from ever presenting him as such, and even if that were his ultimate aim, going public with such a declaration would raise numerous problems. For one, his son is so unpopular and controversial that his designation as successor would trigger a bitter power struggle. Mojtaba's lack of experience in government speaks against him as well. Above all, naming his son would risk irreparably damaging the legitimacy of the Supreme Leader's office, thereby undermining the regime's central institution and putting the existence of the entire political system at risk. After all, the struggle to abolish the shah's hereditary monarchy was one of the major achievements of the 1979 revolution, providing the newborn regime with identity in the eyes of the revolutionary nomenklatura and their diehard followers. If the Islamic Republic allowed a de facto hereditary succession, it would come to resemble the Arab monarchies across the Gulf, which Khomeini and his followers rejected so furiously for many years.

Fear of Increasing Repression

Although there is no solid evidence at present to support the revived rumors that Khamenei's son is making his "claim to the throne," nor that the Supreme Leader's health is rapidly deteriorating, the possibility of a future power grab by Mojtaba should not be ruled out. And one thing is clear: it would not bode well for Iran if Mojtaba were to win a succession contest and become Supreme Leader by relying on his father's authority. Since his power would rest on repression, not reform, it would mean even darker times ahead for demonstrators, journalists, and dissidents, and he would presumably go out of his way to strip rival factions of their power and sinecures. This would

lead to considerable tensions, especially since Mojtaba lacks his father's skills, patience, and sense of timing when it comes to seizing and exerting power. Indeed, if reports about his past actions are true, he seems to have internalized Machiavelli's infamous maxim that power and stability are easier to maintain when the people fear their ruler than when they love him.

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