

# Hojatoleslam Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani: The Supreme Leader's Chief of Staff

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## Introduction

Supreme Leader [Ali Khamenei's](#) chief of staff Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani does not receive much attention from Western media outlets. But Golpayegani often acts as the Supreme Leader's chief representative and his statements and appearances therefore shed light on the Supreme Leader's thinking and priorities. Golpayegani's rise in the intelligence community and the Office of the Supreme Leader, the true center of power in the Islamic Republic, makes him an influential decision-shaper. Indeed, in November 2019, the U.S. Department of Treasury [identified](#) him as "one of the most senior officials within the Supreme Leader's Office."

## Path to Power

Golpayegani was [born](#) in 1943 in Golpayegan, Esfahan Province. His father, Ayatollah Mirza Abolqasem, was a well-known Friday prayer leader in the city. According to Iranian media, at around 20 years old, Golpayegani [participated](#) in a confrontation with the Shah's security forces at the Feyzizeh School in Qom, the bastion of clerical opposition to the Shah and his so-called White Revolution, which [led](#) to the rapid urbanization, industrialization, and Westernization of Iran.

When the Shah was overthrown in 1979, and Ayatollah Ruhollah [Khomeini](#) established the Islamic Republic, Golpayegani joined the Committee of the Islamic Revolution, or Kumiteh, a notorious police force [created](#) by Khomeini to replace the Shah's police force.

According to an [interview](#) with Golpayegani posted on Mashregh News, beginning in 1979 Golpayegani served as then Supreme Leader Khomeini's representative at the Army's Shahid Babaei air force base in Esfahan Province. There he came under the tutelage of Ali Khamenei who was then serving as deputy defense minister. One or two years later Golpayegani was [transferred](#) to Tehran to lead Supreme Leader Khomeini's representative office in the Army's air force, a position he [held](#) until 1989, when Khamenei became Supreme Leader and appointed him as his chief of staff.

Golpayegani held this position in Khomeini's representative office concurrently with a senior post in the [Ministry of Intelligence and Security \(MOIS\)](#). In 1983, Iran's [parliament](#) approved the formation of MOIS, passing a law that [forbade](#) the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) from running its own intelligence organization. The law ostensibly brought the intelligence service under the elected branch of government's control, advancing Khomeini and his backers (including Khamenei's) [belief](#) at the time that the IRGC's intelligence capabilities should be focused on military exigencies.

MOIS soon became the Islamic Republic's premier intelligence service, subsuming and [merging](#) the three main intelligence services that had been operating separately since the founding of the Islamic Republic: the IRGC's intelligence service, the Prime Minister's Intelligence Office, and the Kumiteh. At MOIS, Golpayegani [served](#) as a deputy on parliamentary affairs under Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshari, the first intelligence minister of the Islamic Republic.

Reyshari led MOIS as it amassed substantial power in the mid to late 1980s, including in the parliament (Majles). The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [assessed](#) that between 1985 and 1987, MOIS gradually

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took over internal security from the IRGC, and had built a strong support base in parliament, where it “command[ed] the support of about 100 of the 270 deputies.” The future president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, to whom Khamenei owed his elevation to the supreme leadership, was at this time the speaker of parliament. As a deputy on parliamentary affairs, Golpayegani played a role in marshalling the support of members of parliament, and likely proved his worth to Khamenei, who was re-elected to the presidency in 1985. As president, Khamenei undoubtedly interacted closely with MOIS’s leadership.

## Chief of Staff

Golpayegani’s career trajectory closely resembles that of [Ashgar Mir-Hejazi](#). Both began their careers in the Kumiteh, before becoming founding officials of MOIS. In 1989 Khamenei was selected as Supreme Leader. One of his first decisions was to appoint Golpayegani as chief of staff and Mir-Hejazi as the head of his intelligence and security division. These personnel decisions were a [departure](#) from Khomeini’s practice of appointing learned Shia clerics from the seminary, as Golpayegani and Mir-Hejazi were lower-ranking clerics.

A Hoover Institution [analysis](#) of the Iranian deep-state notes that Khamenei fortified his position as Supreme Leader by expanding the size and scope of the deep-state’s governing apparatus, mainly his Office of the Supreme Leader (Beit-e Rahbar). Lacking his predecessor’s singular religious credentials and charisma, Khamenei ruled by expanding the Office and installing loyalists like Golpayegani and Mir-Hejazi in the most powerful posts despite their lack of religious credentials. The Office came to [extend](#) its bureaucratic and financial control over religious institutions to dilute rival Shia clerics’ power, particularly that of the Grand Ayatollahs, who believed religious leaders should not be involved in state affairs.

The [Office of the Supreme Leader](#) employs between [600](#) and 1,000 people. However, the number of regime officials that answer to the Office is much broader. According to a Wikileaks [cable](#), the Office’s intelligence division, headed by Mir-Hejazi, could include up to 10,000 people. This division, known as Section 101, strengthened Khamenei’s command over MOIS and the IRGC and manages the bureaucratic competition and [power struggle](#) between these two security organs. The Iranian regime is beset by such infighting and factional disputes, which prevents any given faction from amassing enough power to pose a threat to the Supreme Leader’s rule.

Some [reports](#) suggest that the Supreme Leader appreciates Golpayegani’s lack of engagement in overtly political activities. Golpayegani’s public statements tend to be platitudinous endorsements of the revolution, the Supreme Leader, Islamic values, and an anti-American and anti-Israel foreign policy platform. The former speaker of [parliament](#), Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri, has seconded this view, [saying](#) that Golpayegani was selected as chief of staff at the “peak of [his] anonymity,” so that no one would contend that a left-wing or right-wing cleric ran the Office. He appears, then, to have proven himself trustworthy for reasons that were not connected to politics. That his son is [married](#) to Khamenei’s daughter has only strengthened his ties with the Supreme Leader.

Golpayegani’s roles and responsibilities as the Supreme Leader’s chief of staff are not highly publicized. Golpayegani advises the Supreme Leader and acts as his trusted and loyal lieutenant, relaying messages to elected officials and leaders of non-elected institutions like the judiciary. For example, he has

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[conveyed](#) the Supreme Leader's economic priorities—particularly, the Resistance Economy to neutralize sanctions—to parliament and economic officials in [President Ebrahim Raisi's](#) cabinet.

Partly because his impact on these directives remains obscure, some analysts [intimate](#) that he holds less power than other deep-state actors. According to one [report](#), “His actual influence is insignificant compared to Hejazi or Vahid [Haghanian]. He is fairly uninvolved in political or security-related affairs.” However, Golpayegani has been involved in important decisions since the beginning of Khamenei's reign. For example, in the early 1990s, Golpayegani [served](#) on Khamenei's committee responsible for directing a series of political assassinations, which came to be known as the Chain Murders. At the direction of this committee, MOIS agents [assassinated](#), often savagely, activists and intellectuals who were critical of the revolutionary state.

Moreover, Golpayegani “directed the regime's systematic blocking of social and economic progress of the Bahai community,” according to his U.S. Treasury Department [designation](#) in November 2019, pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13876. This Trump Administration E.O. imposed sanctions on the Supreme Leader and his Office. Golpayegani's designation was the first time the U.S. sanctioned an individual [specifically](#) for orchestrating the persecution of Bahais in Iran.

In 1991, Iran's Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council addressed a [memorandum](#) on the matter to Chief of Staff Mohammad Golpayegani. It stated that Bahais should be “enrolled in schools that have a strong and imposing religious ideology...expelled from universities...den[ied] employment...and den[ied] positions of influence.” The letter's [signatory](#), [Mohammad Reza Hashemi Golpayegani](#), was secretary of the [Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council](#). Thus, while Mohammadi Golpayegani might have directed the plan's implementation, he did not preside over the council that planned the repression of the Bahai community at the Supreme Leader's [request](#). Mohammadi Golpayegani did [play](#) a role in the confiscation of Bahai property.

Furthering evidence of Golpayegani's decision-making authority under Khamenei, Golpayegani [served](#) Khamenei as head of a Friday prayer committee. In this role, he influenced the nomination of clerics to be appointed by the Supreme Leader to lead Friday prayers and helped craft the guidance given to Friday prayer leaders on the content of their sermons.

Additionally, Iran Wire [describes](#) him as one of the key members of a policy-making board that formerly managed the [Headquarters for the Restoration of Holy Shrines](#), a purported charity that many believe has ties to the IRGC's Quds Force. In 2014, the charity's management was [transferred](#) to then IRGC Quds Force commander, [Qassem Soleimani](#), who became the sole decision maker.

While the endowment was under the board's management, Golpayegani was in a position to covertly channel funds intended for shrines to the Quds Force, which finances terrorist groups and activities around the world. Golpayegani has also used his office to benefit other branches of the IRGC. In 2016, two years after Soleimani took charge of the charity fund, Golpayegani [expedited](#) a \$580 million project after the project's management was transferred from the Headquarters for the Restoration of Holy Shrines to the IRGC's [Khatam al-Anbiya](#).

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In addition to serving on powerful decision-making bodies, Golpayegani acts as Khamenei's chief representative at public functions and ceremonies and even occasionally abroad. He frequently appears alongside Khamenei, including at [meetings](#) with foreign dignitaries and heads of state. As one of the most senior officials in the Office of the Supreme Leader, his public statements and appearances should be viewed as an indication of the Supreme Leader's thinking and priorities.

In early 2007, it was Golpayegani and not President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's foreign minister who led a delegation to Moscow. More recently, Golpayegani expressed his support for Putin's invasion of Ukraine, [describing](#) it as a "prelude to the reappearance of the Lord of the Age (Imam Mahdi)." Imam Mahdi is the occulted Twelve Imam, which, according to Islamic doctrine, will return to the world on the verge of its destruction to lead the Islamic faithful in a war against evil.

Although not a high-ranking cleric, Golpayegani's statements reveal a commitment to the Islamic values espoused by the conservative clerical establishment. His values reflect antiquated views of the Quran that large segments of the population, especially youth, vigorously reject. For instance, strict Islamic regulations have mandated policing social behaviors since the Kumiteh formed at the outset of the revolution.

In late 2014, Golpayegani called for strict enforcement of laws against cohabitation before marriage, known as White Marriage. He [demanded](#) that officials "show no mercy" against those who engage in the blasphemous act. He [added](#) that homosexuals are liable to lengthy prison sentences and execution. Likewise, in June 2015, he laid out his conviction that "protecting the Islamic Republic is the greatest good and opposing it is the greatest wrong," [speaking](#) before a group of clerics and seminary students in Gilan Province. He mentioned improper veiling among the many sinful acts constituting such opposition. Women are expected to wear the hijab "properly;" their defiance is perceived as an assault on the regime's legitimacy.

Golpayegani's statements often point to deeply-engrained tendencies of Khamenei's loyalists. He characteristically displays utter deference to the Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader's top advisors exclusively [present](#) information that fits his ideological predilections, as is common of the sycophants with which dictators typically surround themselves. They even reportedly [prepare](#) alternative versions of the newspaper for him.

Protecting the Supreme Leader's reputation is a top priority. In the aftermath of [President Ebrahim Raisi's](#) undemocratic election—Khamenei's appointees in the [Guardian Council](#) systematically disqualified viable candidates from running for the presidency—Golpayegani characteristically bemoaned Israel and the U.S. for allegedly pushing propaganda to undermine the Iranian elections. He defended the integrity of the elections, [saying](#), "Those able to cast a vote gave an affirmative response to the Leader's divine call [to participate in elections]." Since the revolution, restricted elections have been used to mollify the Iranian people's discontent with the centralization of power.

Golpayegani's statements are not restrained to domestic matters. He also speaks about foreign affairs, often with the paranoia and hatred toward Israel and the U.S. that is typical of regime officials. In 2017, he [blamed](#) Israel for instigating a referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan that voted in favor of independence, underscoring fears of Iran's restive Kurdish population. In November 2019, just a few days after the U.S.

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Treasury Department designated Golpayegani, he lashed out at Israel, [exclaiming](#), "There is no place in Israel our missiles cannot reach. As Supreme Leader Khamenei has said in the past, the Zionist entity will not last longer than five years."

Islam resides at the core of the Islamic Republic's worldview, and is thus deeply entwined with its foreign policy. In 2020, Golpayegani [said](#) the West is "opposed to Islam and all Muslim states in principle." At another time, he [quipped](#) that the "Crusades have not yet ended." Golpayegani promotes this religious paranoia to galvanize support for the Islamic Republic's antagonistic foreign policy toward the West. This bifurcated perspective also plays into the regime's pretense that it is the protector of Islam and Muslim people.

## Conclusion

Since Khamenei's ascension to the supreme leadership in 1989, the [Office of the Supreme Leader](#) has consolidated power and decision-making authority at the [expense](#) of the elected state. Khamenei has gradually and persistently degraded the republican elements of the Iranian system, culminating in the election of the former chief justice, [Ebrahim Raisi](#), as president. The officials that owe their rank to the Supreme Leader, including those the [Guardian Council](#) favors in elections, answer to him. They have often earned his trust by working on sensitive internal security and intelligence files. This appears to be the case with Golpayegani, who has proven instrumental in Khamenei's efforts to fortify his position via his Office's institutionalization. The Office effectually subordinated the Islamic Republic's chief intelligence and security organs: the IRGC and MOIS. Moreover, the Office diluted the power of rival clerics, presenting Khamenei as the preeminent religious authority despite his lack of credentials.

As the Office of the Supreme Leader's nominal head, Golpayegani serves various functions, many unknown to the public. He advises the Supreme Leader; acts as a gatekeeper, filtering access and information according to the Supreme Leader's preferences and worldview; lobbies members of parliament and cabinet officials; issues directives to the elected and the deep-states; and represents the Supreme Leader at public functions and speaks publicly on his behalf. His longevity in the Office points to how Khamenei rewards his loyalists and keeps them close for extended periods.

Members of Khamenei's trusted inner circle, such as his son [Mojtaba](#), executive deputy Vahid Haghanian, his chief of intelligence [Mir-Hejazi](#), and his chief of staff Golpayegani, likely compete within the Office for influence, power, and prestige. While perhaps not the most powerful actor in the Office, Golpayegani wields substantial influence in the Islamic Republic and warrants close observation, particularly given the current strains on the Iranian system: a virulent domestic protest movement, U.S.-led international sanctions, and the inevitable near-term succession of the Supreme Leader.

With Golpayegani effectively being an octogenarian, he will likely stay in this post until he dies or becomes incapacitated, given Khamenei's comfort with him. However, younger members of Khamenei's office, particularly his son Mojtaba, will play increasingly influential roles as succession nears and Golpayegani ages. If Khamenei dies before Golpayegani leaves his post, he may play an important role in that transition process in ensuring the wishes of Khamenei are implemented. But whoever becomes the next Supreme Leader will likely install his own team, including a chief of staff, to exercise control over the organs of state.