

Esmail Khatib: Islamic Republic of Iran Minister of Intelligence

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In August 2021, the Islamic Consultative Assembly ratified [President Ebrahim Raisi's](#) selection for Minister of Intelligence and Security, Esmail Khatib, a mid-ranking cleric who has attained the title of *Hojjat ol-Eslam*, which means “proof of Islam.” Khatib has decades of experience in Iran’s civilian intelligence apparatus, holding senior positions in the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the Judiciary branch’s counter-intelligence department. Khatib’s revolutionary credentials date back to his seminary studies at Qom, where he studied under the disciples of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Ali Khamenei was among Khatib’s teachers, and his appointment to the sensitive post of intelligence minister is indicative of their close relationship.

Early Career

Born in 1961, Khatib [began](#) his seminary studies in the holy city of Qom in 1975 or early 1976. An official government account [states](#) that he studied under Grand Ayatollah Mojtaba Tehrani, a senior cleric who supported Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei led prayers during Tehrani’s funeral in the 2010s, demonstrating that Khamenei held Tehrani in high regard. At some point, Khatib also studied under Khamenei, but it’s not immediately clear when.

Following the 1979 Revolution, Khatib engaged in propaganda activities, and enlisted in the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) at the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. According to a parliamentary report, he joined the IRGC intelligence and operations unit at the behest of founder Hassan Baqeri. He [sustained](#) a severe injury in combat that ended his deployment to the front. Khatib’s brother and brother-in-law were also killed in combat.

In 1985 or early 1986, Khatib joined MOIS, which was established in 1983 and was the premier intelligence service at the time. Parliamentarian Mohsen Zanganeh [credited](#) Khatib with overseeing the investigation and prosecution of Mehdi Hashemi, commander of the IRGC Office of Liberation Movement, who was convicted and put to death on charges related to treason in 1987. Hashemi was related through marriage to Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, the designated successor of Khomeini. Hashemi’s conviction led to Montazeri’s ultimate removal from consideration for the post. As scholar Ali Alfoneh has [documented](#) in his book “Political Succession in the Islamic Republic,” the networks of then-President and future Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, then-Parliament Speaker Akbar Rafsanjani, and Hassan Khomeini, the founder’s son, were behind Montazeri’s removal. Another investigator in the notorious Hashemi case, [Qolam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei](#), is the current Judiciary chief. Khatib also appears to have served in the foreign directorate section in various capacities, for instance, as an analyst.

Senior Intelligence Posts

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Khatib served as the director of the Intelligence Ministry's Qom Province for more than a decade, beginning in the 1990s. This is a highly sensitive post, since religious seminaries in Qom fall under the jurisdiction. Although the Islamic Republic was founded by a cleric and many of its top posts are reserved for clerics, the state has had a contentious relationship with the clergy in the seminaries. One of the primary points of tension resulted from Khomeini placing the authority to represent the 12th Shiite Imam Mahdi, or Messiah – whom Shiites believe is in occultation until Judgement Day – within the hands of the Supreme Leader. Prior to that, clerics collectively exercised the authority to represent the Mahdi. In addition, after Khamenei came to power, many clerics did not accept him as a senior religious figure and, later, refused to acknowledge his Ayatollah status. Khatib's appointment to this position was an indication of Khamenei's trust.

Khatib's tenure as MOIS Qom Province director was a contentious subject during Parliament ratification debates. One of his detractors, who belongs to the hardline Steadfastness Front faction, [accused](#) Khatib of not doing enough to "predict and prevent" the "conspiracies" in Qom seminaries like "non-revolutionary and anti-Revolution" activities. One of his defenders stated that working in intelligence in Qom requires deftness, and credited Khatib and agents for preventing the success of "the Dominant System [West] and internal collaborators so that the anti-thesis of the revolution rises from Qom." That is a reference to clerics who, for example, support a greater degree of separation between religion and politics.

Khamenei's trust was further demonstrated when the Supreme Leader approved Khatib's appointment to the Office of Supreme Leader Protection [Organization](#) in 2010. That unit would be in charge of facility and personnel protection for Khamenei's inner circle. In 2012, Khatib was [appointed](#) director of the Judiciary branch Intelligence Protection Center, one of the intelligence agencies in the Islamic Republic [theoretically](#) overseeing Judiciary personnel. However, some critics have [pointed](#) out that the intelligence unit was formed without "approval in the Islamic Consultative assembly and outside the authority of the Judiciary branch," and that it interferes with the duties of the Intelligence Ministry.

Khatib's tenure in the judiciary intelligence unit was also the subject of criticism in the Parliament. Critics charged him with failing to do enough regarding prominent corruption cases like that of Akbar Tabari, deputy to former Judiciary branch chief Ayatollah Sadeq Amoli Larijani. After Raisi was selected as Judiciary branch chief in 2019, he [led](#) the prosecution of Tabari on corruption charges.

What We Can Expect From Khatib

Khatib detailed his top four priorities as Minister of Intelligence in a briefing to the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee. He [pledged](#) to "intelligently confront" the "main partners and movements of economic, social, culture, etc. corruption," to make "maximum use

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of revolutionary forces in the minister with priority of revolutionary and *hezbollahi* [phrase for Islamic Republic supporters],” to “strengthen and activate hidden diplomacy for effective intelligence exchange, increase the system’s strategic depth and influence with allied countries inside and outside the region, and support Islamic movements, Hezbollah, and cooperate with the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps Qods Force to strengthen the Resistance Front.” He also vowed to confront “the infiltrating movement in the government especially the country’s sensitive and vital centers and sites.”

In his speech in the Parliament, Khatib [called](#) for “transformation in the hidden intelligence formations” for the ministry to “produce intelligence and oversight in providing security and awareness issues in monitoring all aspects of complex and various security layers at the national, regional and global levels.”

Khatib’s tenure comes amid questions swirling significant intelligence failures in recent years, namely the [assassination](#) of military commander and nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh and sabotages against nuclear facilities, acts carried out by Israel, which led to a [blame game](#) between MOIS and the IRGC.

Furthermore, in recent years, the ministry has been weakened compared to the IRGC Intelligence Organization (IRGC-IO). Overlapping responsibilities between MOIS and IRGC-IO have led to [clashes](#) that have spilled into the public. For example, MOIS disagreed with IRGC-IO when it arrested several environmentalists on espionage charges.

Khatib has cultivated deeper trust in Khamenei and his office, which have a symbiotic relationship with the IRGC. It remains unclear how Khatib would navigate the [power struggle](#) between the Islamic Republic’s competing intelligence organizations, but it would be hard to imagine the IRGC-IO losing ground anytime soon. In theory, Khatib could try to reduce friction between MOIS and IRGC-IO to increase efficiency in the face of external and internal threats, but overlapping responsibility inevitably leads to some fighting.

A significant difference between Khatib and his predecessor [Mahmoud Alavi](#) is that Khatib has actual experience in the ministry. Alavi admitted that he had no intelligence experience when [former President Rouhani](#) sought to appoint him. The intelligence ministry post is a negotiation, at best, between the Presidency and the Office of the Supreme Leader. Compared to all past intelligence ministers, Khatib comes in with the most hands-on experience.

On September 9, 2022, the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) [designated](#) Khatib pursuant to [Executive Order \(E.O.\) 13694](#), a presidential mandate that expressly authorizes the U.S. government to sanction individuals engaging in malicious cyber-enabled activities. The Treasury Department determined that, under the leadership of Khatib, “the MOIS directs several networks of cyber threat actors involved in cyber espionage and

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ransomware attacks in support of Iran’s political goals.” The press release also states that the Iran-sponsored threat actors have engaged in attacks against the U.S., elaborating only insofar as to say the targets of the attacks: government and private sector organizations and critical infrastructure. The MOIS was also, at the same time, designated under this E.O.

The immediate catalyst for these sanctions appeared to be connected to multiple rounds of Iran-sponsored [cyberattacks](#) against Albania, including against the government’s computer systems, but the MOIS’s involvement in malign cyber operations has long been on the radar of the U.S. government. Earlier this year, for example, the Treasury identified a group known as Muddy Water, directed by the MOIS to exploit vulnerabilities to gain access to sensitive information and deploy malware. In September 2020, APT39—another entity owned or controlled by MOIS—was [designated](#) under E.O. 13553.

In addition to these sanctions, the U.S. government announced additional sanctions on Khatib on September 22, 2022. Per Khatib’s pledge to confront “social and cultural corruption,” MOIS has increased its violence against activists, journalists, and members of religious minority communities. Alongside Iran’s Morality Police and its senior leaders, who in that capacity are responsible for enforcing religious laws against behavior deemed immodest, Khatib was accordingly [added](#) to the Treasury’s list of individuals designated under [E.O. 13553](#), which targets human rights offenders. (The MOIS was already designated under this authority in February 2012).

The catalyst for these sanctions appears to be the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman who is mentioned in the opening paragraphs of the Treasury’s press release. Mahsa Amini [was beaten into a coma](#) by the Morality Police while in custody, and later died, because a strand of her hair was showing from under her hijab. The secretary of the U.S. Treasury Department, Janet Yellen, released a statement in which she claimed that the sanctions demonstrate the Biden administration’s commitment to human rights. This statement, though, was issued amid virtual silence from the administration regarding the ongoing mass protests across Iran, spurred by Amini’s murder and led by women in Iran.