

Mohammad Mokhber: Interim President of Iran

May 2024



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Mohammed Mokhber Dezfuli

Mohammad Mokhber Dezfuli currently serves as the Interim President and First Vice President of the Islamic Republic, succeeding President [Ebrahim Raisi](#) following his untimely [death](#). Before this position, his leadership roles at massive business conglomerates—the Mostazafan Foundation and the Execution for Imam Khomeini’s Order (EIKO)—implicated him in the corruption at the heart of [Supreme Leader Khamenei’s](#) domestic political strategy. The Supreme Leader appointed him as the head of EIKO to oversee a large patronage network and implement Khamenei’s vision of a resistance economy to neutralize international sanctions. Furthermore, in these positions he oversaw efforts to punish regime enemies by seizing their property. His current role in the elected branch of government has been used to perpetuate [corruption](#), implement a resistance economy, and punish regime enemies, a pattern which will likely continue as his career advances.

Early Years

Mokhber was born on September 1, 1955 in Dezful, Khuzestan Province. His father, Abbas Mokhber, was a well-known cleric. Mokhber received his primary education in Dezful and Ahvaz, and later obtained a doctorate in [international law](#). Mokhber served as an officer in the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ \(IRGC\)](#) medical corps during the Iran-Iraq War. In the 1990s, he worked as the CEO of Dezful Telecommunications [before he was appointed](#) deputy governor of the Khuzestan Province. In the early 2000s, then-head of the Mostazafan Foundation, Mohammad Forouzandeh, appointed him as commercial vice president of the Mostazafan Foundation. Soon after, he became chairman of Sina Bank’s board of directors, a position he held for approximately [ten years](#). As chairman, Mokhber had influence over the Mostazafan Foundation’s finances, given that it is the majority shareholder of Sina Bank.

Mostazafan Foundation

From his time at the Mostazafan Foundation and Sina Bank, Mokhber gained managerial experience in a [multi-billion-dollar business enterprise](#) that advances the Supreme Leader’s priorities and the regime’s self-enrichment. A sprawling entity, the Mostazafan Foundation [controls](#) over 10% of the country’s economy and [operates](#) in a range of sectors, from steel production, to heavy manufacturing, to oil refinement. The Mostazafan Foundation’s leaders frequently tout claims that the organization provides for the needy. At the same time, they use the purported charity, referred to in Iran as a bonyad, to distribute wealth to regime elites in exchange for their loyalty to the Supreme Leader. As commercial vice president at Mostazafan Foundation, Mokhber formed relationships with religious and political elites in the Supreme Leader’s patronage network. He also [developed contacts](#) in the Office of the Supreme Leader, which maintains direct control over the Mostazafan Foundation.

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As chairman of Sina Bank's board of directors, Mokhber oversaw the bank's financing of the regime's malign activities, including its [ballistic missile](#) and nuclear programs. The European Union (E.U.) exposed his links to these programs in 2010 when it [levied sanctions](#) against him and Sina Bank – an action accompanied by [designation](#) for ties to the regime. Furthermore, in 2018, the U.S. Department of Treasury [sanctioned](#) Sina Bank under counterterrorism authority Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, and revealed that Sina Bank financed the Basij, a volunteer militia within the IRGC – a proscribed terrorist organization. Furthermore, in [November 2020](#), the U.S. sanctioned the Mostazafan Foundation and identified its wealth-expropriation activities. These activities and other human rights abuses provided critical experience Mokhber later applied to his role in the EIKO's property seizures.

Mokhber's ability to advance Iran's strategic interests and finance terrorism was not limited to his role at Sina Bank. He also leveraged his position at the Mostazafan Foundation to obtain the support of MTN, a South African telecommunications company, in acquiring defense equipment, swaying a vote at the United Nations (U.N.) on Iran's nuclear program, and possibly funding terrorist organizations – including Hezbollah and the IRGC. [According](#) to MTN, in exchange for the company's assistance, Mokhber offered to use his influence at the Mostazafan Foundation—a major shareholder of the Iran Electronic Development Company (IEDC)—and at the IEDC to break the IEDC's obligations with Turkcell, a mobile phone operator based in Turkey. Turkcell alleged that it lost the contract because of MTN's use of bribery and other acts of corruption, including [promises](#) to influence South Africa's vote at the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency's vote on Iran's nuclear program.

In June 2021, a U.S. lawsuit [alleged](#) that MTN (along with ZTE, a Chinese telecommunications company partially owned by the Chinese government) helped “fund and arm Hezbollah, Jaysh al-Mahdi, and the IRGC, including the Qods Force.” The complaint argued that “the defendant MTN Irancell is a joint venture between MTN Group, which has a 49 percent stake and is not in charge, and the Bonyad Mostazafan and [IEDC], which collectively own a 51 percent stake and are fronts for the IRGC, including the Qods Force.” The lawsuit further [claimed](#) that MTN's business with the IRGC resulted in the injury and death of thousands of Americans between 2011 and 2016.

Thus, early in his career, Mokhber was implicated in a corruption scandal that tied the Mostazafan Foundation to the IRGC. The sanctions against Sina Bank revealed that he was involved in financing Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programs and state-sponsored terrorism. He could conduct these activities without any oversight aside from that of the Office of the Supreme Leader, because the Mostazafan Foundation's finances are shielded from external audits according to Iranian law. Through these activities Mokhber demonstrated his abilities as a manager and loyalty to the objectives of the Supreme Leader and IRGC. As a result, he was rewarded with an appointment to lead another wealthy bonyad in 2007—the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO).

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Mohammad Mokhber with portraits of Supreme Leader Khomeini and Supreme Leader Khamenei in the background

Head of Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order

Like the Mostazafan Foundation, EIKO serves several functions under the control of the Office of the Supreme Leader, including financing the regime's malign activities and consolidating wealth in the hands of key officials. At the head of EIKO, Mokhber [oversaw](#) the forceful displacement of Iranian citizens through property seizures, a major source of the organization's finances. As reported by Reuters, the EIKO controls over [\\$95 billion-worth](#) of assets built on "the systematic seizure of thousands of properties belonging to ordinary Iranians." Given his skill with expropriation, Mokhber was well-suited to lead EIKO.

EIKO's Property Seizure

After Mokhber became head of EIKO, the bonyad accelerated its ruthless attacks and expropriation activities against minority groups viewed as regime enemies. On countless occasions, the bonyad has repossessed properties belonging to Christians or Bahais, with the backing of Iranian courts. In 2016, an Iranian appeals court [upheld](#) a confiscation order in favor of EIKO, leading to the eviction of a Protestant organization called Jamaat-e Rabbani Church Council from a valuable property near Tehran two years later. EIKO has [displaced](#) entire Bahai communities, often [arguing](#) that they were members of a "perverse sect." These property seizures are so pervasive that, in the words of one human rights lawyer, they are part of a concerted effort to "[commit genocide](#)" against Bahais over time.

Though the victims of EIKO's property seizures often belong to religious minority groups, the Iranian people more broadly also incur significant costs. EIKO obtains wealth by virtue of [tax exemptions](#), [public funding](#), preferential interest rates on loans, and regulatory protection from private sector competition. However, a large share of that wealth does not return to the Iranian people. At the helm of EIKO for 14 years, Mokhber managed the distribution of these resources [to regime insiders](#), and thus often failed to deliver on promises that he made on behalf of his

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purported charity to the Iranian people, including promises to mass-produce a Covid-19 vaccine.

Covid-19 Vaccines

Though EIKO is designed to support the Islamic Republic, it continues to masquerade as a public charity. While leading the organization, Mokhber [stated](#), "EIKO has concentrated its entire capacity to empower people economically, especially in the deprived areas." However, such statements are deceptively designed to provide the bonyad with a veil of legitimacy. The clearest example of this came during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the virus spread, Mokhber [perpetuated](#) false claims that the organization had extensive vaccine production capabilities, attempting to convince the Iranian people of EIKO's status as a charity and justify the flow of government funding and private property to the organization.



Mohammad Mokhber during Iran's Covid-19 response

Ultimately, an EIKO-controlled entity known as the Barakat Foundation was tasked with developing and producing a Covid-19 vaccine. Mokhber formed the Barakat Foundation early in his tenure at EIKO at the Supreme Leader's request. Under Mokhber's leadership, the organization became one of [the wealthiest entities](#) under EIKO's direction. Further underscoring this entity's importance, EIKO's board of directors [selected](#) the former head of the Barakat Foundation, Aref Nourzi, to lead EIKO after Mokhber stepped down to become first vice president in 2021. Mokhber [promised](#) that the Barakat Foundation would produce tens of millions of doses of the vaccine, referred to as CovIran Barakat. Yet, approximately a year after CovIran Barakat was [ready](#) for public use, it accounted for [3.8 million](#) of the 37.8 million doses

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administered, thus raising questions about where the government funding went. A reformist member of parliament, Ali Tajernia, alleged that the Barakat Foundation had received a [\\$1 billion payment](#) before delivering its vaccine. The head of public relations at Shifa Pharmed—the Barakat Foundation subsidiary tasked with vaccine production—vehemently [denied](#) that it had received the advance payment. This situation demonstrated the corrupt nature of EIKO, and its role in enriching regime officials.

The Resistance Economy

The Supreme Leader’s approach to vaccine production reflected his vision of a resistance economy that emphasizes domestic production over foreign imports. Much as he tasked Mokhber with overseeing vaccine production, Khamenei tasked him with facilitating the [implementation](#) of the resistance economy. At the head of EIKO, Mokhber was positioned to neutralize the impact of international sanctions via domestic investment, [particularly](#) in the energy sector. However, as an immense business enterprise [with financial interests](#) in many of Iran’s key economic sectors, EIKO plays a crucial role in developing the domestic economy more broadly. Due to his understanding of the resistance economy and loyalty to regime interests, the Supreme Leader supported Mokhber’s subsequent political career.

The First Vice President of Iran

Mokhber’s experience as a Khamenei appointee at EIKO likely secured his first vice presidency, given Raisi’s lack of experience in economic affairs. Mokhber was Raisi’s first personnel selection after taking office in early August 2021. Over the course of Raisi’s presidency, Mokhber emerged as a powerful actor in the administration, ultimately succeeding him as interim president in 2024.



Mohammad Mokhber appearing at an event as First Vice President

Mokhber's Roles in the Administration

The first vice president of Iran is ostensibly the second most powerful person in the elected branch of government after the president. Statutory duties include [chairing cabinet meetings](#) in the president's absence and coordinating the other vice presidents' activities. The First Vice President also participates in deliberations of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which the president chairs. The first vice president is also tasked with assuming the presidency if the president were to become incapacitated or otherwise leaves office. Prior to his death, some analysts speculated that Raisi could have been selected by the [Assembly of Experts](#) to succeed Khamenei, which would have allowed Mokhber to ascend to the presidency. Raisi's untimely death prevented this exact course of events from taking place, though Mokhber still ascended to serve as interim president.

As first vice president, Mokhber has been tasked with implementing the Supreme Leader's domestic and foreign policy priorities, despite his lack of political and ministerial experience compared to his predecessor. [His predecessor](#), Eshaq Jahangiri, served as a member of parliament, governor of Isfahan Province, and a minister of industries and mines before he was appointed as Rouhani's second-in-command. Though Mokhber served as an appointee of the Supreme Leader at the time of his appointment, his only political experience was an earlier stint as deputy governor of the Khuzestan Province. Therefore, it is likely that Mokhber was chosen in order to further implement the resistance economy. [According](#) to the office of the president, Raisi's key mission for the first vice president was the development of a "strategic industrial plan and promotion of domestic production," aligning with this goal.

Mokhber also traveled extensively inside Iran to shore up a base of political support. For example, after the Metropal Towers collapsed in May 2022, he was [quickly sent](#) to Abadan to observe the damage and contain the unrest that followed accusations of corruption against officials involved in the building's permitting. He proposed to "investigate" corruption, which he agreed was to blame for the building's structural flaws. Ironically, Mokhber [sat on the board](#) of the Arvand Free Trade Zone, where the owner of the building had been accused of corruption on multiple occasions.

He was also tasked with some foreign policy responsibilities. In July 2022, he [met](#) Syria's foreign minister in Tehran. He renewed Iran's optimistic vows that Iran would soon expand economic integration with Syria—an expectation Iran will struggle to fulfill given its economic crisis at home. In October 2022, he was [dispatched](#) to Moscow with senior IRGC officials and an SNSC official to finalize an agreement for Iran to send drones and surface-to-surface missiles to Russia to support its war in Ukraine, which has proven critical for Russia's warfighting [capability](#). In December 2022, Mokhber [received](#) Chinese Vice Premier Hu Chunhua in Tehran, days before Iran was voted out of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women.

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In addition to conducting diplomacy with strategic partner countries like Syria, Russia, and China, Mokhber occasionally [meets](#) terrorist commanders from the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces. And he, unlike Raisi, has also [met](#) with the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Raisi's predecessor Hassan Rouhani played a more hands-on role with the IAEA and occasionally met with the director-general.

Mokhber also supported Raisi's efforts to resource Hamas and other proxies in Gaza, which facilitated the attack against Israel on October 7, 2023. During Mokhber's vice-presidency, Iran also demonstrated that Iran is increasingly willing to take direct action against Israel, launching an unprecedented missile and drone [attack](#) on April 19, 2023. As interim president, Mokhber has indicated that these acts of aggression will [continue](#).

Primacy within the Raisi Administration

Under Raisi's administration Mokhber competed for influence with other key appointees, namely Assistant for Economic Affairs Farhad Rahbar and Vice President for Economic Affairs [Mohsen Rezaei](#), who later became secretary of the Supreme Council for Economic Coordination. One analyst [argued](#) that Raisi preferred Rahbar as his choice for first vice president, because he was a conservative economics professor and former head of the powerful Management and Planning Organization in the Ahmadinejad administration. Rahbar has executive governmental experience more akin to former first vice presidents, and he has substantial knowledge of the economy.

Some cabinet ministers [reportedly](#) do not know whether to answer to Mokhber or Rahbar, a tension exacerbated by Rezaei's influence. Competition between Mokhber and Rezaei [paralyzed](#) the Minister of the Economy Ehsan Khandouzi. Rezaei's [reported](#) advocacy for reform amid the significant uprising enveloping Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini further complicated disagreements, prior to Rezaei's departure from the administration in 2023.

Notwithstanding Rezaei's clout, which derives from his pedigree, Mokhber emerged as the more powerful of the two officials. Mokhber [dismissed](#) Rezaei (and Vice President for Executive Affairs Solat Mortazavi) from the Economic Commission in April 2022. Then, in December 2022, [Mokhber ordered](#) Khandouzi to refute Rezaei's public statement that cash handouts would be doubled. Both of these actions greatly diminished Rezaei's authority. Thus, Mokhber emerged as the primary economic policymaker and a powerbroker in the administration. Given his close relationship with the Supreme Leader, reaching back to his leadership of EIKO, his influence within the Raisi administration became formidable.

Rezaei [resigned](#) as vice president for economic affairs in June 2023, and Raisi appointed him as head of the Supreme Council of Economic Coordination, tasked with coordinating economic

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policy among the three branches of the government. This was his second resignation from top posts in the Islamic Republic in under two years; in [August 2021](#), he resigned as secretary of the Expediency Council, a body tasked with settling disputes between the Guardian Council and the Majles. The reasons for his resignation can be observed in the surrounding circumstances. His resignation as secretary of the Expediency Council preceded his appointment as vice president, which took place less than a month later. His resignation as vice president for economic affairs may have been crafted to relieve pressure on the Raisi administration due to the ailing economy. However, his influence on economic policy at the Supreme Council of Economic Coordination should not be understated, creating room for continued conflict with Mokhber.

Interim Presidency

On May 19, 2024, Raisi's helicopter [crashed](#) while travelling from Azerbaijan. After the Iranian government admitted that the president did not [survive](#), along with other members of his cabinet, Mokhber was [confirmed](#) as interim president by the Supreme Leader. In this position, Mokhber [promised](#) to continue implementing Raisi's agenda, including support for regional proxies and Iran's aggressive posture against Israel and the U.S. Faced with mistrust in electoral politics and the potential for new protests, Mokhber remains in an precarious [position](#) as he leads the country into a new presidential election. It is not yet known if Mokhber himself will run for a full term as president, or if he will step aside for other political allies.

Conclusion

For a large part of his career, Mokhber worked at important bonyads implicated in Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programs, terrorism, corruption, mismanagement, human rights violations, and sanctions evasion. As chairman of Sina Bank's board of directors, he directed funding toward nuclear proliferation activities at the behest of the Supreme Leader. At Mostazafan Foundation, he acted on bribes from MTN, and a subsequent U.S. lawsuit against MTN exposed the links between the Mostazafan Foundation, the IRGC, and IRGC-backed terrorist organizations responsible for the death of thousands of Americans in the Iraq War. Through this process, he demonstrated his loyalty to the Supreme Leader and the regime's self-enrichment.

Mokhber used the vast wealth accumulated by EIKO—at the expense of the Iranian people—to reward regime insiders like himself. Managing the patronage network endeared him to the Supreme Leader, but at a cost. Mokhber consistently failed to deliver on promises to the Iranian people, as illustrated by the Covid-19 vaccine debacle. These failures undermine the legitimacy the bonyad attempts to achieve through charity activities. In the context of international sanctions against Iran owing to the regime's [malign activities](#), Mokhber champions the concept of a resistance economy. It remains to be seen how his political career will evolve after Raisi's untimely death, but in the short-term he will maintain the status quo as interim president.