

Iran's Intelligence Organizations and Transnational Suppression

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Brief Analysis

MOIS and other agencies have been surveilling, abducting, and murdering dissidents for nearly four decades now, brazenly conducting operations in foreign countries under hardline and “pragmatic” Iranian governments alike.

In late July, news broke that Iranian intelligence agencies had plotted to kidnap expatriate journalists and conduct cyber-espionage against scholars abroad by impersonating a British university. Both cases are signs of the Islamic Republic's ongoing—and expanding—transnational suppression against Iranians who speak out against the regime.

When discussing recent Iranian intelligence operations, international observers tend to focus on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In doing so, they often overlook the numerous malign activities undertaken by the regime's primary intelligence body, originally known as the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).

Evolution of Iranian Intelligence

MOIS was established in 1983 as a way of consolidating certain revolutionary-era intelligence units. In 1989, it became responsible for coordinating the entire intelligence community, consisting of sixteen intelligence and counterintelligence bodies.

MOIS is nominally under the president's control, but the minister who oversees the agency must be chosen with the Supreme Leader's approval. By law, the minister must also be a *mujtahid* (cleric who can interpret Islamic sources) without any political affiliation.

MOIS recruits primarily among seminary students. Many of its top-ranked personnel studied at the Haqqani School, a Qom seminary that produces a reliable stream of hardliners. In 1984, MOIS created Imam Mohammad Bagher University to train security agents and analysts. The rigorous selection process is based on religious and ideological

qualifications.

MOIS Assassination of Dissidents, 1979-1997

Initially, under the direction of intelligence minister Mohammad Reyshahri, MOIS focused on eliminating Iranian opposition elements, mainly Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a group that was active at home and abroad. After 1989, right-wing Islamists who were more loyal to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei came to dominate the ministry with his support. MOIS then turned its attention to assassinating Iranian dissidents under the management of Ali Fallahian, another Haqqani graduate.

The first high-profile incident occurred in July 1989, when Abdulrahman Qassemloo was killed in Vienna. In August 1991, the shah's former prime minister Shapour Bakhtiar was killed in Paris. One of the most well-known incidents occurred a year later in Berlin, where MOIS operatives and Lebanese Hezbollah triggermen assassinated Iranian Kurdish dissidents at the Mykonos restaurant. In 1994, MOIS reportedly collaborated with the IRGC-Qods Force on bombing the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association community center in Buenos Aires, killing 85 people and injuring 300. This wave of targeted violence continued until the end of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency in 1997.

During this same period, MOIS also arrested and killed many activists and writers inside the country, including former health minister Kazem Sami, writer Saeidi Sirjani, and various Christian priests. In one infamous incident in 1996, the agency tried to kill a busload of twenty-one Iranian intellectuals en route to a poetry conference in Armenia by driving them off a cliff. Luckily, they survived.

Such actions were justified by characterizing them as part of the fight against "cultural invasion." In the regime's view, Western countries were bent on undermining Islamic culture and corrupting Iranian morals by promoting their materialistic culture and lifestyles.

MOIS Under the Reformists, 1997-2004

Despite the MOIS leadership's support of the conservative candidate in the 1997 presidential election, reformist politician Mohammad Khatami wound up winning the vote. In a compromise with the Supreme Leader, Khatami appointed Ghorban Ali Dorri Najaf Abadi—a graduate of the Haqqani School with no intelligence background—as minister of intelligence.

Initially, MOIS hardliners continued eliminating Iranian intellectuals in a series of political assassinations labeled the "Chain Murders." In 1998, the agency killed at least six activists, including Dariush Forouhar and his wife Parvaneh Eskandari.

Under pressure from the reformist government, MOIS finally acknowledged that its members had committed these crimes. At Khamenei's behest, however, the regime tried to portray this activity as a foreign plot—some MOIS members and their families were arrested and tortured into confessing they were Israeli agents. The highest-ranking detainee was internal security deputy minister Saeed Emami; when he died in custody, authorities claimed he had committed suicide.

When Dorri Najaf Abadi resigned in January 1999, Ali Younesi was appointed as the new intelligence minister. Like his predecessors, Younesi was a Haqqani School graduate who served as head of the Islamic Revolutionary Court. Under his tenure, MOIS sidelined right-wing hardliners, and reformists came to dominate the ministry. MOIS soon expanded its use of surveillance technology, satellite jamming capabilities, and related activities.

Back Under the Hardliners, 2005-2012

In 2005, new president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad appointed Haqqani School graduate and hardline cleric Qolam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei as his first intelligence minister. Mohseni-Ejei's goal was to bring MOIS back under the

Supreme Leader's control.

On the domestic front, MOIS focused on neutralizing supposed "color revolution" plots, which it saw as a new foreign strategy for toppling the regime. As part of this effort, the agency suppressed civil society organizations and arrested many civic and political activists. MOIS also continued abducting dissidents abroad, including Froud Fouladvand, founder of the monarchist opposition group Kingdom Assembly of Iran, who was kidnapped in Turkey in 2007.

The disputed 2009 presidential election triggered mass protests throughout the country in an uprising called the Green Movement. Ahmadinejad accused certain MOIS personnel of engineering the unrest to undermine his administration. On July 26 of that year, he dismissed Mohseni-Ejei because of his inability to stop the movement.

His replacement, Haydar Moslehi, was the first non-Haqqani graduate to oversee MOIS. Formerly Khamenei's representative in the IRGC and the Basij militia, Moslehi oversaw an additional round of purges inside MOIS, dismissing many supporters of reformist presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. Eventually, MOIS helped other security services suppress the Green Movement. It also helped capture Abdul Malek Rigi, the head of Jundallah, a Sunni terrorist group active in southeast Iran.

Yet MOIS consistently failed in many of its other missions. For example, between 2010 and 2012, several Iranian nuclear scientists were assassinated, allegedly by Israel. Iranian security services sought to retaliate by sending operatives to kill Israeli diplomats in Bangkok in February 2012, but the mission failed spectacularly. In another scandal, MOIS tortured innocent Iranians into falsely confessing that they had facilitated the assassination of the scientists.

Over time, conflict emerged and intensified between Ahmadinejad and Moslehi. The president complained that he was not receiving intelligence briefings; indeed, MOIS often bypassed him and sent top-secret reports directly to Khamenei. Moslehi later defended his behavior by arguing that MOIS was the Supreme Leader's ministry, not the president's. Ahmadinejad responded by accusing MOIS officials of smuggling valuable goods, hoping to undermine them so he could install his supporters in their place. Yet when Ahmadinejad tried to fire Moslehi in April 2011, Khamenei rejected the president's order and reinstated Moslehi, thereby checking Ahmadinejad's authority and prerogatives.

Suppression Under the Pragmatists, 2013-2020

When Hassan Rouhani became president in 2013, he selected Mahmoud Alavi, a cleric without any intelligence background, as the next head of MOIS. This was a compromise move championed by Khamenei, who had been shifting more of his support to the IRGC Intelligence Organization (IRGC-IO), a newer agency established in 2009. Coupled with Alavi's incompetence, this shift led to MOIS being marginalized in domestic security affairs and refocusing on foreign intelligence.

In February 2017, the powers and responsibilities of the MOIS foreign intelligence branch were formally expanded. The resultant increase in the agency's activities abroad included extensive monitoring and targeting of dissidents and defectors. In December 2015, MOIS operatives killed Mohammad Reza Kolahi Samadi, an MEK member who was suspected of bombing the Islamic Republic Party's headquarters in 1981. In April 2017, MOIS operatives in Istanbul allegedly killed Saeed Karimian, the owner of a satellite television channel. In 2018, the FBI arrested a group of U.S.-Iranian dual citizens affiliated with MOIS, charging them with secretly monitoring Jewish centers and MEK members. That same year, a MOIS operative acting in the guise of an Iranian diplomat attempted to plant a bomb at an MEK rally in Paris. And in November 2019, MOIS killed Masoud Molavi Vardanjani, a former agency official who had defected and fled to Turkey. Abductions were rampant as well—in July 2020, MOIS kidnapped dissident Jamshid Sharmahd in Dubai; three months later, it kidnapped Habib Chaab, an Iranian ethnic Arab separatist leader in Turkey.

The IRGC-IO conducted similar abductions of its own. In October 2019, it kidnapped Ruhollah Zam, an Iranian journalist in Iraq, later executing him. Indeed, despite competing over resources and privileges, MOIS and the IRGC-IO generally collaborated on the broader mission of maintaining the regime and suppressing dissidents.

Conclusion

Transnational suppression is not a new phenomenon for the Islamic Republic. From its inception in 1979, the regime relentlessly surveilled, abducted, and killed opposition members and defectors regardless of which government was in power. Many observers believed that Tehran's behavior would normalize somewhat with the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal; instead, MOIS intensified its transnational activities under Rouhani's "pragmatist" government.

Although Iranian intelligence organizations have developed a degree of sophistication and competence through four decades of experience, their level of success has varied. In general, their operations against dissidents are more successful in countries that suffer from greater corruption, or where Iran has more allies and resources. In June 2020, for example, MOIS killed fugitive judge Gholamreza Mansouri in Hungary after luring him away from Germany. Yet the agency's track record is poor in North America and Europe thanks to these jurisdictions' competent security services and rule of law.

In short, front-page plots to kidnap journalists and impersonate universities are just the latest efforts in the long chain of transnational suppression that has defined the Islamic Republic. Western powers should condemn these activities more directly and punish them whenever possible.

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