

Iranian President Raisi: The Hanging Judge

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Brief Analysis

As Raisi carves out his role as Iran's new president, the international community must recognize and seek to bring to light his involvement in Iran's state-led 1988 massacre of prisoners.

Ayatollah Khomeini's choice of Ebrahim Raisi to be the country's new president via a sham "election" has renewed interest in the mass executions of the summer of 1988. That summer, Iranian authorities murdered a minimum of 5,000 political prisoners under the direction of a four-man death panel, which included Raisi. Iranian authorities have, of course, engaged in political executions ever since taking power in 1979, but this was the most intense period—about a 100 or more a day over about two months. More recent, contemporary executions have also targeted **popular figures**. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-fear-popular-figure-execution-navid-afkari>) But Raisi's role in that earlier period has emerged over the years from the families of the dead, as well as those who survived or escaped incarceration, and even some regime officials who attempted to stop the massacre.

Heart of Darkness

According to multiple witnesses, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini appointed Raisi to a four-man committee in 1988 to organize and preside over the massacres. Raisi had proven his bona fides by serving at the age of 20 as a prosecutor for the district of Karaj, a large satellite city of Tehran, then for the province of Hamedan, and in 1985, as deputy prosecutor of Tehran.

Those who would be executed by the committee had already been sentenced to years in prison—but not to death—during the 1980s for opposition to Khomeini's clerical rule. Many were arrested for merely distributing or reading political tracts criticizing the regime. It is clear from the family photos of those executed that most were in their early twenties; a minority appear to be young teenagers or in their thirties. The photos of the dead resemble a high school or university yearbook, but these "graduates" ended up in the Iranian gulag.

In late July, prison authorities ended all family visits to political prisoners and ordered them interrogated. Typically, interrogators would ask prisoners if they would publicly plead "guilty" of treason, denounce the actions their colleagues, spy for the Iranian regime, participate in regime firing squads, or run through minefields at the Iran-Iraq war front. If a prisoner said no to any of these questions, he or she would be condemned to death. Those condemned were either killed by firing squad or hanged. One witness recounted guards pulling at bodies twitching on nooses to complete the executions. Some speculated that hangings were preferred because they were quieter and did not draw the attention of neighbors. The mass executions came to an end in September.

In late October that year, family members of those executed were summoned to the prisons and given the personal effects of their loved ones, then told to leave immediately and not to "make problems" about the executions. Some information about the locations of mass graves eventually leaked out, but to this day families have never been told about burial sites. Moreover, authorities have sometimes broken up commemorative gatherings at presumed burial sites. **A comprehensive Amnesty International report** (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en/>) provides a window into this period in extensive detail.

Regime Motives

While the manner and scope of the mass executions are fairly well understood, the exact motivations of the regime, including Raisi's personal motivations, and the timing of the killings are less certain and deserve further study. Historians and observers have posited several possible driving forces. First, there is the possibility of a grotesque, utilitarian reason: overcrowded prisons. The regime had arrested thousands of prisoners in the 1980s. By 1987, the situation had become so bad that prisoners had adopted the word "sardini" for having to sleep with their heads adjacent to the

next person's feet. Thus, the executions may have been a means to create more space for prisoners who were considered less defiant or dangerous.

Others have speculated that the senior regime officials may have been avenging themselves against the Iranian Mujahedin fighters, allied with the Iraqi military, who had tried to take an Iranian border town during the summer in the hopes of sparking an Iranian uprising against the clerics.

However, the Ayatollah Montazeri, who was Khomeini's heir-apparent until he was shunted aside for his independence from the regime, disputes this interpretation. According to a tape leaked to the Western media, Montazeri told senior regime officials, including perhaps Raisi, the following:

"This [the massacres] is something that the Ministry of Intelligence had in mind and invested in and Khomeini's son, Ahmad Khomeini, was persistently pushing from three or four years ago that all Mujahidin, even those of them who had just read their newspapers, magazines and pamphlets, must be executed. This is something that they were already thinking about, and now they are taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the attack of the Mujahidin on us."

In fact, Montazeri and his associates fought against the massacre plans but lost the argument. Political prisoners who survived have mentioned that Montazeri's representatives were present in the courts and would insist on reasonable proof for the establishment of guilt during the trials. One of Montazeri's letters to Khomeini, which were also leaked to the international press, pleaded for some compassion: "at least order to spare women who have children ... the execution of several thousand prisoners in a few days will not reflect positively and will not be mistake-free ... A large number of prisoners have been killed under torture by interrogators ... in some prisons of the Islamic Republic young girls are being raped ... As a result of unruly torture, many prisoners have become deaf or paralyzed or afflicted with chronic disease." Montazeri was placed under house arrest until his death in 2009.

Raisi's Role in the Massacres

Raisi broke his silence and publicly defended the mass killings, albeit in coded language, in a lecture on May 1, 2018 and documented by Amnesty International. He did not dispute his presence at a meeting on the issue—presumably the recorded one with Montazeri—but noted that "during the period [in question], I was not the head of the court... The head of the court issues sentences whereas the prosecutor represents the people." At the same time, using the word "confrontation" in apparent reference to the mass killings, he regarded them as "one of the proud achievements of the system" and praised Rouhollah Khomeini as a "national hero," thereby pushing the onus of the responsibility for the killings towards the dead leader.

Thirty years after the killings, Raisi is president of Iran, and the international community must determine how to deal with this head of state and his past. Despite these horrors, Washington's main priorities should remain the achievement of a nuclear accord while limiting the Iranian program and its attempts to foment unrest throughout the Arab world. Dealing with the nuclear issue means dealing with Raisi. An all-out U.S. attack on his human rights record, past and present, could cause the regime to dig in its heels even further.

However, the United States can and should support the efforts of others to investigate the 1988 killings and Raisi's role in them. In June 2021, UN Rapporteur for Iran Javid Rehman, a professor of Islamic law in London, called for just such an investigation. And on August 10, Sweden began trying Iranian national Hamid Noury for his role in the mass executions—a verdict is expected in April 2022. Noury was an assistant to one of the prison directors, and his trial will likely allow U.S. press and human rights groups to delve into this period and Raisi's role in it.

This investigation or others could attempt to authenticate that the recorded Montazeri meeting did indeed include Raisi. It could also seek to contact senior regime family members who now live in the West. Perhaps they would be willing to discuss what they know about the killings, despite the dangers this might entail.

In addition, the international community can also amplify the handful of voices from the region who are raising concerns about the matter. Some Middle East analysts, like Lebanese journalist Hasam Itani, have published [analyses](https://aawsat.com/home/article/3036176/%25D8%25A5%25D8%25A8%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2587%25D9%258A%25D9%2585-%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A6%25D9%258A%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A5%25D8%25B9%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-1988-%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AD%25D9%2584%25D9%258A%25D9%2584)

[detailing the extensive role that Raisi played in the 1988 murders.](https://aawsat.com/home/article/3036176/%25D8%25A5%25D8%25A8%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2587%25D9%258A%25D9%2585-%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A6%25D9%258A%25D8%25B3%25D9%258A-%25D9%2588%25D8%25A5%25D8%25B9%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-1988-%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AD%25D9%2584%25D9%258A%25D9%2584)

Yalbugha Zahrani, an Iranian researcher, [explained the importance](https://www.skynewsarabia.com/world/1456421-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA%25D9%2587%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AD%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B4-%25D8%25AD%25D8%25A7%25D9%2583%25D9%2585-%25D9%2586%25D9%258A%25D9%2588%25D9%258A%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%2583-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AA%25D9%2586%25D8%25AD%25D9%2589)

[of non-Iranians speaking out on the matter, saying that Nouri's trial in Sweden—which came after his 2019 arrest in Sweden while visiting family—could cause Iranians like Raisi who perpetrated these crimes to fear traveling abroad given the precedent. Likewise, human rights activist Laden Bazargan, \[whose brother was executed in the 1998 massacre, also called for travel restrictions for those implicated. He noted that in 1987, the United States prevented the Austrian president from entering the country due to his involvement in Nazi crimes.\]\(https://iranwirearabic.com/archives/17328\)](https://www.skynewsarabia.com/world/1456421-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA%25D9%2587%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AD%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B4-%25D8%25AD%25D8%25A7%25D9%2583%25D9%2585-%25D9%2586%25D9%258A%25D9%2588%25D9%258A%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%2583-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AA%25D9%2586%25D8%25AD%25D9%2589)

Other Iranian expatriates have rallied across Europe and the United States to call attention to Raisi's involvement, and National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)-affiliated journalists, such as Hanif Jazayri, have [long called for his prosecution. <https://www.newsweek.com/iran-massacre-1988-1561985>](https://www.newsweek.com/iran-massacre-1988-1561985)

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However, while several Arabic news sources have published articles mentioning allegations of Raisi's involvement, the overarching reaction from the broader region has been silence. This should be understood as self-censorship, enhanced in light of nuclear talks, potential Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, and Iranian reach within several Arab countries. Therefore, supporting those who do call for international investigations into the issue, and subsequent repercussions, is all the more important.

Over the long term, one can only hope that there will be one day a museum in Tehran dedicated to the memories of the regime's victims. Such museums have been built after the fall of dictatorships in Latin America and Central Europe to commemorate victims. These museums have tremendous emotional impact, particularly when they display the photos of the victims. The faces look out to the observer as if to say: do not forget us, especially those of you with whom we shared this earth, however briefly. ❖

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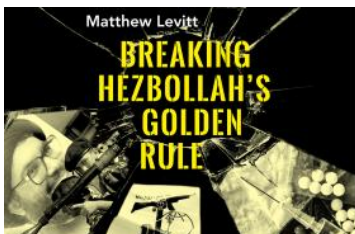
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