

Mashhad Appointments Show Tightened Hardliner Grip

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Brief Analysis

Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi, who is taking over a massive organization, has a repressive record dating back to the 1980s.

On March 8, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed the first new leader in thirty-seven years for the Astan-e Qods Razavi organization, the country's wealthiest and arguably most important entity, which runs the Mashhad shrine as well as a vast business empire. The appointment followed the March 4 death of longtime administrator Abbas Vaez Tabasi. The group is now Islam's largest religious endowment and serves as a significant financial tool for the region's radical Islamists.

a city's major player

Mashhad is the second largest Iranian city in both population and land area. It is also the country's holiest city, where Ali ibn Musa, or the infallible eighth imam (aka Imam Reza), is buried. Located in the heart of Khorasan-e Razavi province, which significantly helped shape the country's Iranian as well as Islamic identity, Mashhad welcomes more than 22 million pilgrims a year, according to the latest issue of the monthly periodical *Mehr Nameh*. Beside its special place in Iranian socioreligious life, Mashhad has gained political cachet under Ayatollah Khamenei, who was born in the city in 1939 and lived and studied there until the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Since taking office in 1989, the Supreme Leader has established the custom of traveling to the city for the springtime Nowruz festival (Iranian New Year), where he delivers a speech at the Shrine of Imam Reza covering the past year's key domestic and foreign policy issues and usually employing a tougher-than-usual inflammatory tone.

In general, Khamenei does not intervene in the local governing of Iran's provinces, but Khorasan represents an exception. Here, the Iranian interior minister only appoints a provincial governor after consulting closely with the Supreme Leader, who demands similar oversight for other provincial issues. To give a sense of Astan-e Qods Razavi's clout, more than 43 percent of the city's land falls within its control. Furthermore, Iranian officials estimate

that a full third of the country's agricultural territory belongs to religious endowments, much of it to Astan-e Qods, whose land is valued by experts at more than \$20 billion. In 2004, the Economic Organization of Astan al-Qods Razavi was registered to manage Astan's economic and financial activities. The organization has more than twelve thousand employees, spread out among eighty-nine companies and foundations, and competes with other groups nominally outside government control such as Khatam al-Anbia and Bonyad Taavon Naja (Police Cooperation Foundation), the first associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and both under direct command of the Supreme Leader, exempt from taxes and elected bodies' oversight. Regardless of experts' estimates, neither the public nor the government knows the real value of Astan's assets or annual revenue. The complex is accountable only to the Supreme Leader through its representative.

clerical tensions

In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini appointed Abbas Vaez Tabasi, a leading figure among Mashhad's revolutionary seminarians, custodian of Astan-e Qods. In this role, he gained unparalleled influence and authority not only in Khorasan but also in Iran's political and economic spheres. Like former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Tabasi's financial interests predated the revolution. Unlike his Mashhad peer Khamenei, who came from a poor family and lived modestly until 1979, Tabasi was raised in a prosperous clerical family.

When Khamenei came to power in 1989, he sought to replace the revolutionary generation of administrators with his own acolytes, who owed their political education not to the republic's founders but to Khamenei-associated institutions such as the IRGC and the intelligence sector. Tabasi, however, remained from the earlier generation. He held an independent political identity and strong organic popularity to go with his control of the massive Astan complex. A traditional conservative, Tabasi disliked the regime's emerging hardline wing, which benefited from Khamenei's unbending support. In April 2005, shortly before Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first election as president, Khamenei appointed one of the future president's backers, Sayyed Ahmad Alam al-Hoda, as Mashhad's Friday prayer imam. Alam al-Hoda was also close to Jebheh-ye Paydari (Front of Stability of the Islamic Revolution), an extreme political faction. Between Tabasi and Alam al-Hoda, tensions eventually became so serious that the two did not hide their reluctance to meet. Separately, the judiciary, suggesting the position of the higher leadership, charged Tabasi's son, Nasser Vaez Tabasi, with corruption in dealings related to the al-Makaseb company. Confirming speculation about the ayatollah's leanings, the elder Tabasi met with a cold reaction when he complained privately to Khamenei about the judiciary's treatment of his son and tarnishing of his family's image. Despite a possible sense that the Supreme Leader was laying the grounds for his replacement, Tabasi subsequently maintained cordial formal ties to the Supreme Leader -- and a warm relationship with Rafsanjani.

Khamenei Asserts Control

In naming the fifty-five-year-old Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi to lead Astan-e Qods Razavi, Khamenei made a clear statement. Raisi, who has served in the judiciary, including as its first deputy, is notorious for his involvement in the mass killing of political prisoners in 1988. Having filled positions including Special Court for Clerics prosecutor, he is well known for his utter loyalty to Khamenei and affinity for his worldview. Earlier this year, Raisi was reelected to the Assembly of Experts, on whose management board he has served. Furthermore, he is the custodian of Tehran's Imamzadeh Saleh shrine and endowments and, even more important, a Khamenei appointee on the trustees board of the Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam -- a significant nominally nongovernment entity with some \$95 billion in assets. Since Tabasi also represented Khamenei in the province, the Supreme Leader was able to name the sympathetic Alam al-Hoda to replace him. The Mashhad-born Alam al-Hoda, who is Raisi's father-in-law, was Khamenei's prerevolution comrade, and the two share views on Western cultural invasion and animosity toward liberal and democratic values. Alam al-Hoda and Raisi's influence will now extend beyond Khorasan-e Razavi province, affecting various fields of the economy, culture, and politics.

On March 8, the same day he appointed Alam al-Hoda, Khamenei also named the new members, secretary, and director of the Supreme Council for the Khorasan Seminary. This is significant because, after Qom, Mashhad has Iran's largest clerical base -- and one generally even more staunchly antirationalist in interpreting Islam and more fanatical in the cultural arena than Qom's. The new seminary appointees will undoubtedly uphold this approach, given their subordination to the regime's unelected authoritarian core.

Post-Khamenei Prospects

Khamenei's appointments came shortly after the late February elections for parliament and the Assembly of Experts, whose high turnout and results showed Iranians' preference for a more effective economic system and normalization of Iran's international relations. The vote also reveals the Iranian cultural and economic middle class's belief that the ballot box offers its sole hope of rescuing Iran's frail middle class and enacting slow, incremental national progress. Against such aspirations, the regime's radical anti-Western core is methodically strengthening its position. Given this continuing consolidation of power and the protection of its adherents' vast political and economic interests, Iran's revolutionary brand of Islam will persist after Khamenei's death, shaping the agenda of his successor, whoever he may be.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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