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PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Meet Esmaeil Khatib, Iran's New Spymaster

by Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood and Erfan Fard

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The new president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, has selected cleric Esmail Khatib as Minister of Intelligence. Khatib is a radical Islamist with close ties to both Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. During his tenure, we can expect a more aggressive approach by the Ministry of Intelligence, meaning more terrorism and violence at the hands of the Islamic regime.

Ebrahim Raisi was sworn in as the new president of the Islamic Republic of Iran on August 5, 2021. Six days later, he released his cabinet selections. Raisi chose cleric Esmaeil Khatib as Minister of Intelligence. Khatib will be the regime's eighth Minister of Intelligence, succeeding Mahmoud Alavi.

Who is Khatib?

Information on Khatib is scarce. He was born in 1961-62 and is an influential cleric with close ties to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. This is no surprise, as he was Khamenei's student when studying Islamic jurisprudence. He was also a student of Muhammad Fazel Lankarani, Naser Makarem Shirazi, and Mojtaba Tehrani; all of them are radical Islamists.

Lankarani was a die-hard supporter of Ayatollah Rohollah Khomeini, supported the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, and issued a [fatwa](#) in 2006 against Azeri physician and writer Rafiq Tagi, who was later assassinated. Makarem Shirazi was highly influential in the preparing of the constitution of the Islamic Republic. He is mostly known for his [objection](#) to allowing females to watch sporting events. In 2010, Shirazi [stated](#) that "the Holocaust is nothing but superstition." Mojtaba Tehrani was a student of Khomeini and is very close to the incumbent Supreme Leader. He is known primarily for his support for the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist theory.

Khatib is thus a highly conservative and radical cleric with close ties to the Islamic establishment and to Ali Khamenei.

Khatib's prior positions

Unlike Mahmoud Alavi, the outgoing Minister of Intelligence, who had no previous experience in security or intelligence, Khatib has been involved with both. He does not, however, have a formal education in intelligence studies or political science. His expertise lies solely in Islamic jurisprudence.

In 1980-81, after the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) was established, Khatib, then in his early twenties, joined the precursor of the IRGC Intelligence Organization. His exact role is unknown, though it is believed that he was highly active in the killing of Iranian opponents of the new Islamic regime who resided in Iranian Kurdistan. During that period, Khatib cooperated closely with Mohsen Rezaee, now a major general of the IRGC and secretary of the powerful Expediency Discernment Council.

In November 1997, Khatib was appointed head of the Ministry of Intelligence regional branch in Qom by then Minister of Intelligence Ali Fallahian, another conservative cleric close to Khamenei. In 1992, during Fallahian's tenure, the [Mykonos Restaurant assassinations](#) occurred. The restaurant, which was in Berlin, was attacked by terrorists sent from Iran to eliminate Iranian opposition members. Several Iranians were killed in the attack. A German court placed the blame on the Islamic regime's most senior leaders, including Fallahian. The AMIA attack in Argentina in 1994 also occurred while Fallahian was Minister of Intelligence, leading to his being placed on an Interpol [wanted list](#) by Argentina.

Khatib was previously head of the Security Department of the [Astan Quds Razavi](#) (AQR), a trust that manages the shrine of Imam Reza. The head of the AQR between 2016 and 2019 was current president Ebrahim Raisi, who left the position when he was appointed Chief Justice of Iran.

Beside the above positions, Khatib has worked directly for Ali Khamenei in his administration (the "House of Leadership") and also served as Iran's chief warden for several years.

The Ministry of Intelligence under Khatib

Khatib has been installed as the new Minister of Intelligence at a time when the Islamic regime is being bombarded by one catastrophe after another. Tehran is struggling to keep the country safe from [infiltrations](#), attacks on its [nuclear plants](#), and [assassination](#) attempts on its most [important](#) human assets. Iranian intelligence and counterintelligence are deeply [compromised](#),

and conflicts roil between the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC Intelligence Organization. These factors were without doubt of the utmost importance when Khatib was selected.

Khatib is not only very close to Raisi and trusted by him, but also a loyal servant of Supreme Leader Khamenei. It is understandable, therefore, that he was selected to purge the Iranian intelligence community and make its counterintelligence and information protection more effective and secure. He has strong experience in intelligence and counterintelligence, the blessing and trust of the Supreme Leader as well as the country's most powerful ayatollahs, and perhaps most importantly, he is trusted by the IRGC. Khatib is thus expected not only to "clean up" the Iranian intelligence community but also to diminish the ongoing conflict between the IRGC Intelligence Organization and the Ministry of Intelligence. We will probably see closer cooperation between the two.

During Khatib's tenure, the Ministry of Intelligence is like to be more aggressive on both the domestic and international fronts. Domestically, the use of torture and arbitrary arrests of opponents of the regime will increase as the ministry grows more proactive. In the region, we will probably see a more sectarian Iran. Khatib's brand of Islamism, which puts him in the company of the most radical ayatollahs in Iran, will inevitably affect his decision-making. In the US and Europe, Iranian dissidents will be subjected to intensified surveillance and espionage. Islamic terrorism around the world at the hands of the Islamic Republic of Iran will increase in intensity.

While Iran will be careful not to provoke the Western world, it will be much more ready to use terrorism and violence to eliminate opponents of the regime as well as anyone it considers a threat to the regime.

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