



Spotlight on Iran



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“Haqqani” and “Alavi”: hotbeds for the growth and development of Iranian leaders

In August 2013 the Iranian president presented his new government, which is largely comprised of technocrats with an extensive academic education. One of Rowhani's government's distinctive characteristics is the prominent presence of graduates of “Alavi” high school and “Haqqani” religious seminary. Ever since the Islamic revolution of 1979, these two educational institutions have been considered a “hotbed” for the growth and development of high ranking officials in the upper echelons of the Iranian regime, who maintain their relations and form a network of allies within the government's various branches.

The political influence of the graduates of “Haqqani” religious seminary (established in Qom in 1964), many of whom are identified with the Iranian politics' radical right, reached its peak during President Ahmadinejad's first government. This can be partly attributed to the close relations between the former president and the senior conservative cleric Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, who was one of the founders of the religious seminary. Rowhani's government features two “Haqqani” graduates: Minister of Justice Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi and Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ali Jannati. These two ministers first met as undergraduates in the religious seminary.

Graduates of the “Alavi” high school (established in Tehran in 1955), which combined high-level general studies with religious studies, were also integrated into the Islamic republic's political and administrative elite. The current government includes several graduates of the school: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif; the Minister of Industry and Mines, Mohammad-Reza Nematzadeh; and the chief of staff of the president of Iran, Mohammad Nahavandian. Mohammad-Ali Najafi, whose candidacy to the post of minister of education was rejected by the Majles, is also an “Alavi” graduate.

In August 2013 Iran's President Hassan Rowhani presented his new government to the Majles for approval. Rowhani's government, which is largely comprised of technocrats with an extensive academic education, is characterized, among other things, by the prominent presence of graduates of "Alavi" high school and "Haqqani" religious seminary. Ever since the Islamic revolution of 1979, these two educational institutions have been considered a "hotbed" for the growth and development of high ranking officials in the Iranian regime, who maintain their relations and form a network of allies within the government's various branches.

Haqqani religious seminary

Haqqani religious seminary was founded in 1964 in the city of Qom, after several leading clerics reached the conclusion that the traditional system of religious seminaries needed to be reformed. The seminary was named after one of the people who contributed to its establishment, a merchant by the name of Haqqani-Zanjani.

The two prominent clerics who took part in founding the religious seminary were Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, one of the Islamic revolution's thinkers and leaders, and Ayatollah Ali Qodousi, who served as Attorney General after the Islamic revolution. Both founders were killed in terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Mojahedin-e Khalq organization in 1981: Beheshti was killed during a party conference of the Islamic Republican Party in June 1981, and Qodousi was killed in September 1981.

Beheshti and Qodousi reached the conclusion that the traditional religious seminaries fail to train religious clerics who have adequate understanding of current affairs and new sciences. In establishing and managing the religious seminary Beheshti and Qodousi were aided by the two senior conservative clerics Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, who now serves as the chairman of the Guardian Council, and Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, who is considered to be a radical right hardliner of the Iranian religious establishment. These two senior clerics were lecturers in the religious seminary, and Mesbah-Yazdi was also a member of the seminary's management committee.

Unlike other religious seminaries, the syllabus introduced in Haqqani was based on the academic regulations set forth by Ayatollah Beheshti, which also included modern subject matters. Besides Islamic religious law and Koran studies, the syllabus included Arabic literature, Persian Literature, English, Western philosophy, natural sciences

(physics, chemistry and biology), and social sciences (psychology, sociology, Islamic economy, history, and Islamic geography). The seminary inculcated its graduates with indoctrination bonding them by means of a unique interpretation of religious texts and preaching political awareness and activism, often in competition with other religious seminaries.



Ayatollah Beheshti with students of Haqqani religious seminary

One of the religious seminary's graduates, Ali Fallahian, who served as the Intelligence Minister in the government of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), recalled in his memoirs that the religious seminary was established in order to train clerics who possess religious law skills but are also able to integrate in the political and social scenes, thanks to their understanding of current affairs and modern fields such as English, sociology, psychology, economics, politics, and law (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8511080145>). According to Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the founders of the religious seminary meant to train clerics who are guided by the needs of their contemporary society rather than the needs of "the Qajar period". He indicated that the institution's founders meant to use the Haqqani religious seminary for implementing the reform in all other religious seminaries (<http://www.irdc.ir/fa/content/6685/print.aspx>).

The early 1970s saw an increased involvement of the religious seminary's graduates in active opposition of the royalist regime. Ali Fallahian said that the first organized demonstrations of the religious seminary students against the regime took place in 1971 and increased from 1975 onwards. Documents of the SAVAK, the royalist regime's Organization of Intelligence and National Security, which were made public

after the revolution, indicate that in the 1970s the SAVAK closely followed the activity in the religious seminary and assumed that the seminary leaders maintained a close relation with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, despite the efforts made by Ayatollah Qodousi, who headed the seminary since 1966, to avoid manifest political activity in the institution for fear it may be closed by the authorities. The SAVAK assumed that most of the religious seminary students identified with the ideas expressed by the sociologist Dr. Ali Shariati (1933-1977), one of the prominent thinkers of the resistance movements against the Shah, even though students and lecturers in the institution held pro-Khomeini activities. The SAVAK documents even claimed that Qodousi conditioned the acceptance of new lecturers to the seminary on their support of Ayatollah Khomeini (<http://www.irdc.ir/fa/content/6685/print.aspx>).

In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution, the combined training of clerics who possessed modern education allowed the seminary's graduates to serve in various positions in the government and administration. Following Ayatollah Qodousi's appointment as Attorney General after the revolution, a group comprising several of the seminary's graduates joined him in the judiciary. After both Qodousi and Beheshti were killed in the early 1980's, the Haqqani religious seminary was renamed as Shahideyn Seminary (*Madrese-ye Shahideyn*, i.e., the Two Martyrs Seminary), in memory of the two high ranking clerics.

The integration of the seminary graduates in the regime's institutions increased in the late 1980s following the appointment of Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, who himself served as a lecturer in the seminary, as head of the judiciary in 1989. After the establishment of the Intelligence Ministry, which was headed by Mohammad Reyshahri, another graduate of the seminary, the presence of Haqqani graduates was felt in this ministry as well. By the late 1980s, the seminary graduates' activity was also felt in the Islamic Propaganda Organization of Iran, the Revolutionary Guards, and the Special Clerical Court (SCC), which was established in 1987.

Starting from the mid 1990s, the seminary was affiliated with elements identified with the Iranian politics' radical right wing, led by Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi. The influence of Haqqani graduates in the political system reached its peak during the presidential term of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, partly because of the close relations between Ahmadinejad and Mesbah-Yazdi. Ahmadinejad is considered to be a spiritual follower of Mesbah-Yazdi, and his election as president in June 2005 expressed the increased commitment to implement the Islamic revolution's ideology.

However, President Ahmadinejad's identification with the "deviant faction" in the second half of his term and his continuous and unreserved support of his controversial chief, Rahim Mashaei, forced Mesbah-Yazdi to renounce his support of the president. In the last two years of Ahmadinejad's term as president, on several occasions the senior cleric sharply criticized the president's relations with the deviant faction. Consequently, the influence of "Haqqani" graduates in the regime decreased. In May 2008 Ahmadinejad dismissed Minister of the Interior Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, a Haqqani graduate, due to mutual disagreements. In July 2009 the president also dismissed another Haqqani graduate - the Minister of Intelligence, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i. Reports claimed that the two were in odds after the minister criticized the president's decision to appoint Rahim Mashaei as his first vice president. Ahmadinejad also dismissed two other high ranking officials who graduated from Haqqani: Parviz Davoodi, the president's first vice president, who completed his term on July 2009 (although he was later appointed as the chairman of the Center for Strategic Research in the office of the president), and Gholam-Hossein Elham, who served as the government's spokesman and the Minister of Justice during the first term of Ahmadinejad's government.

(<http://www.shafaf.ir/fa/news/64345/%D8%B4%D8%A7%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%87-%D8%AD%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%DA%86%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF>)

Another graduate of Haqqani, Morteza Aqa Tehrani, who served as Ahmadinejad's moral advisor and the ethics mentor of his cabinet, has also distanced himself from the president in recent years. In 2008 Tehrani was elected as a Majles member, representing the Steadfastness Front, which is affiliated with the radical right wing. Another prominent Haqqani graduate, the Majles member and former deputy of Intelligence Minister Fallahian, Ruhollah Hosseinian, is also affiliated with the Steadfastness Front. In 2007 the president appointed Hosseinian as his security advisor.

While most of the seminary's graduates are identified with the Iranian right wing, several Haqqani graduates have become clerics and politicians with a different political orientation, such as Ayatollah Yousef Sane'i, one of the senior clerics identified with the reformists, and Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi, the Mayor of Tehran from 1989 until 1998, considered to be an ally of the former president Mohammad Khatami.

In Rowhani's government, the network of Haqqani seminary graduates is represented by two ministers: Minister of Justice Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, and Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ali Jannati, the son of Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati. The two ministers, met during their studies in the seminary. As mentioned earlier, Pour-Mohammadi served as Minister of the Interior in Ahmadinejad's government. Thanks to his close relations with Pour-Mohammadi, Jannati left his post as ambassador to Kuwait and was appointed as Pour-Mohammadi's deputy minister of Interior in Ahmadinejad's first government, a post he held until 2006 when he returned to his position as ambassador to Kuwait.

Another Haqqani graduate who is considered an ally of Rowhani's is Ali Younesi. Younesi, who headed the Islamic Revolutionary Court of Tehran and later served as the Minister of Intelligence in Khatami's government (2000-2005), was recently appointed as Rowhani's advisor for religious and ethnic-linguistic minorities.

Alavi high school

Alavi high school was founded in 1955 by Ali Asghar Karbaschian. Karbaschian (known as Allameh) was a disciple of the senior cleric Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Boroujerdi, who was considered source of emulation until his death in 1961. In the early 1950s Karbaschian moved to Tehran and initiated the establishment of the Islamic high school in order to strengthen religious education among graduates of the state education system. His allies claimed that he declared that "instead of waiting for students to come to the mosques, we have to bring religion to the schools".¹

Karbaschian was aided in founding the school by Reza Roozbeh, a cleric and a high school teacher in the city of Zanjan, who also possessed modern education in the field of physics. The two men decided to establish a modern school, which would combine high-level general studies with religious studies. They were also aided by Sheik Hadi Tehrani, their contact person with the bazaar merchants who provided part of the financing needed for operating the school.

Beside the formal syllabus, the school introduced Islamic contents, in line with the conviction that religion and science do not contradict each other and that it is possible to train students so that they will possess advanced modern education, while

¹ Rajaei, Farhang. *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (Austin, 2007).

maintaining their religious and cultural values and loyalty to Shiite Islam. To stress its religious commitment, the school is named after the first Shiite Imam, Ali bin Abi Talib. Acceptance to the school was conditioned on passing a severe screening, which included an examination and a personal interview. The school shortly became one of Tehran's leading high schools, and in addition to the regular syllabus, organized sport and social activities, aimed at strengthening the relations between the students.

One of the school's graduates, Abdolkarim Soroush, who was later among the prominent intellectuals who opposed the concept of "the Rule of the Jurisprudent" in the 1990s, wrote in his memoirs that the school's founders sought to train "Muslim scientists", students who will be well versed in both science and faith. Soroush recalled that the school management carried out a strict screening process, and that they ensured that all candidates came from religious families with a positive reputation. Nevertheless, thanks to the financial support received from merchants and clerics, the school also accepted candidates who did not belong to families of means (<http://drsoroush.com/Persian/Interviews/P-INT-20110430-KandokavDarAhvaleSoroush.html>).

After the Iranian uprising of 1963, the students became increasingly involved in political activity, a tendency which increased in the 1970s. The most prominent influence was exerted by the Mojahedin-e Khalq movement, which was founded in 1965 and sought to integrate between Shiite Islam and Marxism. The Hojjatiyeh movement, which was known for the struggle it waged against the Baha'is, was also influential amongst the school's staff and students. Fearing that the school may be closed by the authorities, the management tried to prevent political activity within the school. They did, however, enforce a dress code in line with the rules of Islam, and forbade the students to go to the cinema or watch television, which were perceived as encouraging moral and social corruption.

Even throughout the revolution, the school authorities prevented students and teachers from getting involved in political and revolutionary activity; however, soon they also were dragged to the revolutionary movement. Alavi first became famous when the Islamic revolution leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, chose the school as a temporary residence in 1979, after returning from his exile in France. Khomeini's choice probably resulted from security reasons and the school's proximity to the homes of senior revolutionary leaders (<http://isna.ir/fa/news/9011-09408>).



Ayatollah Khomeini in Alavi school after returning to Iran in 1979 (<http://tarikhirani.ir>)

Because Alavi's students were trained in both general and religious studies, they soon became a "sought after commodity" in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution. Despite their lack of religious qualification, the school's graduates were perceived as possessing religious education, and thanks to their professional skills they became an essential part of the new regime's beurocracy and integrated very well in the Islamic Republic's political and administrative elite. The school trained a large number of managers who held managerial positions since the early 1980s, many of them in the foreign service.

Among Alavi school's prominent graduates are Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, speaker of the seventh Majles (2004-2008); Ali-Akbar Velayati, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Supreme Leader's advisor for international affairs; Mojtaba Khamenei, son of the Iranian leader; Kamal Kharazi, Minister of Foreign Affairs in Khatami's government (1997-2005), who also taught physics at Alavi school; Hossein Saffar Harandi, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Ahmadinejad's first government; Ali Motahari, conservative Majles member; Seyyed Mehdi Khamoush, chairman of the Islamic Propaganda Organization; Hadi Nejad Hosseinian, former Iranian Ambassador and Permanent Envoy to the United Nations; Mohammad-Taqi Banki, head of the Planning and Budget Organization and the Minister of Energy in the second government of Mir-Hossein Mousavi in the 1980s; and Ahmad Masjed Jame'i, who served as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in Khatami's government and was recently elected as chairman of the City Council of Tehran

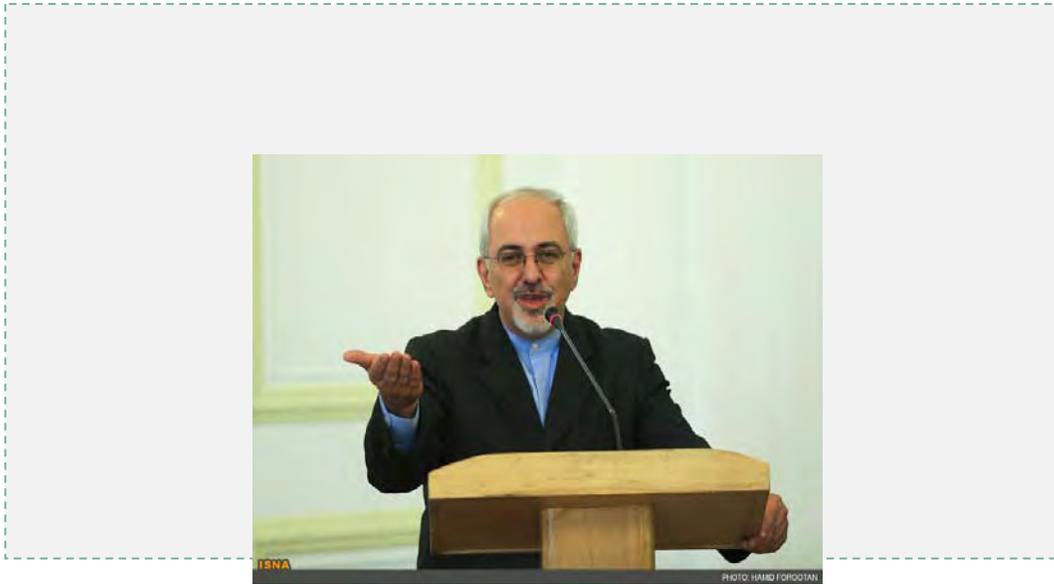
(<http://tarane-azadi-iran.blogspot.co.il/2010/11/blog-post.html>).



Former Majles speaker Haddad Adel (left) at a ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Alavi school

The Alavi graduates in the current government are: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif; the Minister of Industry, Mines and Commerce, Mohammad-Reza Nematzadeh; and president Rowhani's chief of staff, Mohammad Nahavandian. In his memoirs, Minister of Foreign Affairs Zarif recalled that starting from his second year as an Alavi student he was treated favorably by the school headmaster, Ali Akbar Hosseini, and by the school founder, Allameh Karbaschian, who frequently chose him to deliver speeches during religious ceremonies that took place at the school. Zarif wrote that his first speech was delivered during the Shiite holiday of Ghadir, and since then he got used to writing and delivering speeches. He said that his speech writing was influenced by Dr. Ali Shariati. The minister of foreign affairs also indicated that during his studies, he took part in meetings of the Hojjatiyeh movement and in conferences attended by revolutionary youngsters (from the book "آقای سفیر" (Mr. Ambassador), some sections of which were published in:

<http://www.cgie.org.ir/fa/news/5103>).



Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif

Mohammad-Ali Najafi, whom president Rowhani presented as his candidate for the post of Minister of Education, is also an Alavi graduate, but his candidacy was rejected by the Majles. Another Alavi graduate who is an ally of Rowhani's is the Majles member Hassan Ghafouri Fard, who is considered to be an ally of former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and who supported Rowhani during the most recent presidential elections.