

Hojatoleslam Mahmoud Alavi: Intelligence Minister of Iran

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Hojatoleslam Mahmoud Alavi's career has spanned Iran's armed, deep, and elected states. He has been a legislator, a member of the Assembly of Experts, an appointee of Iran's supreme leader, and most recently intelligence minister. Alavi is unique in that he has maintained his credibility as a national security decision-maker while simultaneously railing against the [securitization](#) of society. At times, this has caused him political problems. This profile will explore Alavi's trajectory across Iran's multiple power centers.

Alavi Builds a Network

Mahmoud Alavi was born in 1954 in Fars Province in Iran but spent much of his [childhood](#) in Iraq. He was educated at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad, eventually receiving a Ph.D. in Islamic law. Shortly after the Islamic Revolution, Alavi started his career in the regime, beginning with his [appointment](#) as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's representative in Lamerd from 1979-80. This position provided Alavi with an early platform and visibility. The supreme leader's representatives connect the velāyat-e faqīh, or guardianship of the Islamic jurist, with more localized provincial matters. Soon after, capitalizing on the connections he made while working for Ayatollah Khomeini, Alavi won a seat in parliament in 1981 and served in the legislature for years during Khomeini's supreme leadership and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's speakership.

After Khomeini died, Alavi left Iran's parliament to work in the administration of the newly-elected President Rafsanjani, where he [served](#) as a deputy defense minister from 1989-91. The position of deputy defense minister has a prestigious lineage in the Islamic Republic, as Ali Khamenei served in the role before he became president. Alavi's tenure at the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) was also noteworthy because it took place during a [period](#) of structural change in Iran's security architecture. MODAFL was newly empowered, following its merger with the former Ministry of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). To coincide with the new ministry, Iran began publicly declaring its intention to increase arms purchases. Rafsanjani's Defense Minister Akbar Torkan, whom Alavi served under, [told Kayhan](#) that the government wanted to spend \$10 billion on such acquisitions. It was thus during this period of empowerment, rebuilding, and renewal for MODAFL that Alavi deepened his engagement with national security issues. It also enabled him to develop ties with Torkan, who would later be in a position to further promote Alavi's career.

The Deep State

After time in the Rafsanjani administration, Alavi returned to parliament and served as a member there from 1992-2000. Iran's supreme leader, likely recognizing his service as Khomeini's representative in Lamerd and his role in MODAFL, then [anointed](#) Alavi as his representative to Iran's Army and head of its Ideological and Political Organization (IPO). The IPO holds an important mission in the Islamic Republic—ensuring the subservience of Iran's regular Army to the velāyat-e faqīh. As opposed to the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#)—which was founded as the regime's Praetorian Guard—the regular Army's origins in the Pahlavi monarchy

made it suspect in the eyes of Iran's clerical establishment. As a former Minister of Defense Mostafa Chamran [said](#) at the dawn of the Islamic Revolution, "As far as I am concerned, the most important issue which must be addressed in the Defense Ministry...is the question of a purge in the army. Another important issue related to this purge...is the need to change the existing system in the army...As far as we are concerned, the existing order is an order created and tailored by the satanic regime." According to a RAND Corporation [estimate](#), by early 1986, the regime purged around 23,000 military personnel.

Alavi inherited this suspicion of the Army during his tenure. During the nine years he spent there—from 2000-09—he adopted a paternalistic tone towards the members of the Army. In an [interview](#) he gave to Tabnak News in 2008, entitled "In the Artesh There is No Abuse of Soldiers," he [quoted](#) the founder of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, dubbing members of the Army as "our children that we love" calling on them to "return to the nation."

Nevertheless, Alavi found himself on the wrong side of the Office of the Supreme Leader after the protests that followed the disputed presidential reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009. Later that summer, the supreme leader reshuffled military leadership. A media [report](#) from the time [cites](#) the head of the Office of the Supreme Leader Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani justifying removing Alavi from his position because of his election to the Assembly of Experts. But Golpayegani also hinted at disappointment in Alavi's performance, [saying](#) "[t]he army must do more to gain the satisfaction of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei...The work done at the Ideological-Political Office is very valuable, but still not enough." The supreme leader replaced Alavi with Mohammad Ali Ale-Hashem, a cleric from Tabriz. His [announcement](#) of the new appointment was also telling. Khamenei charged Ale-Hashem with promoting "a proper ground, which is prepared in the Army through using new methods, spirituality and morality." Part of the reason for this displeasure with Alavi may have had to do with the paranoia after the June 2009 election unrest, particularly whether Iran's armed forces were sufficiently loyal to the regime. Following Ahmadinejad's reelection, Commander-in-Chief of the Army Ataollah Salehi [complained](#) that he saw [photos](#) of Green Movement leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who were put under house arrest, in the rooms of his forces during a visit. This fear of disloyalty potentially figured into the supreme leader's decision-making. In sum, following one of the greatest periods of unrest in the history of the Islamic Republic, Khamenei chose to replace Alavi, potentially not viewing him as dependable amid a period of prosecutions and purges.

In the years after, Alavi remained as an elected member of the Assembly of Experts, but soon found himself as persona non grata. In 2012, the Guardian Council [disqualified](#) him from running for another term in parliament for a "lack of adherence to Islam." Given that Alavi had served in parliament for four terms, was permitted to run for the Assembly of Experts election in 2009, and had been a Khamenei appointee, such a move was curious. But it could be explained by Khamenei's dismissal of him from his position in the Army in 2009.

The Rouhani Administration

Alavi's stock within the regime improved after [Hassan Rouhani](#) won the presidency in 2013. Akbar Torkan, under whom Alavi served as deputy defense minister during the Rafsanjani administration, was named [head](#) of Rouhani's transition team. It's this network that likely figured into Alavi's nomination as Rouhani's intelligence minister. Traditionally, while Iran's presidents nominate intelligence ministers, such personnel decisions usually [require](#) the approval of Iran's supreme leader. Thus Khamenei's approval of Alavi's nomination after his previous dismissal from his post in the Army was significant.

Alavi's appointment also appeared to be modeled after Ali Younesi, who served as intelligence minister under then-President Mohammad Khatami. Prior to his service in Khatami's cabinet, Younesi [served](#) as the supreme leader's representative to the Army's intelligence branch. Alavi, having been previously Khamenei's representative to the Army and head of its IPO, had a similar background. In fact, Younesi went on to become Rouhani's special assistant for ethnic and religious minorities' affairs.

After his nomination, Alavi encountered resistance within parliament, particularly over a media interview he gave during which he criticized the Guardian Council's disqualification of former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani from running for president in 2013. Alavi [told](#) the news outlet, "Ayatollah Rafsanjani's qualification for the post was higher than anyone, but he was rejected by the Guardian Council, a political move that is not in the merits of the council as a state institution." Given Alavi's previous service during the Rafsanjani administration and his own disqualification by the Guardian Council, such commentary was unsurprising. But it was a bridge too far for principlists in Iran's parliament.

In the end, legislators voted to approve his nomination, with Alavi [declaring](#) to parliament that he wished to "institutionalize durable security without securitizing society." He also [invited](#) Iranians who had fled the country after the 2009 presidential elections back to Iran on the condition they had not committed a crime. It was this mirage of openness that perhaps led the Intelligence Ministry's magazine to [reveal](#) the structure of its apparatus on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of its creation. The Magazine [detailed](#) how Alavi oversees a coordination council, comprising around 16 different agencies. Some observers at the time [believed](#) the more regular meetings of the coordination council under Alavi was a move to increase his power, amid turf wars with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Intelligence Organization (IRGC-IO). Indeed, after Alavi encouraged Iranians who left Iran after the 2009 elections to come home, Mehdi Taeb, the head of the Khamenei-controlled Ammar Strategic Base, and the brother of Hossein Taeb, the head of the IRGC-IO, [warned](#) Alavi "not to interfere in issues that he might not have any specialty in." The tension became so fierce that Alavi [claimed](#) the supreme leader had to issue a "harsh warning" to IRGC media outlets, warning them about undercutting Rouhani.

Alavi also faced off against the IRGC-IO over Western infiltration within the ranks of the regime. In 2015, he [cautioned](#) that infiltration cases should not be used "in such a way that decreases its worth and value so it becomes a trivial issue." His ministry [disagreed](#) with the IRGC-IO over the arrest of environmental activists in Iran, denying they were spies, as well as whether a member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team, Abdolrasoul Dorri Esfahani, was [engaged](#) in espionage. Alavi also

faced backlash over the arrest of activists with Telegram accounts—believed to be by the IRGC-IO—with the then Deputy Speaker of Parliament Ali Motahari [threatening](#) his impeachment if he failed to provide an explanation. Motahari went as far as to [say](#), “[t]he only accountable institution that is named in the constitution is the Intelligence Ministry, and if others are interfering in their work, the Intelligence Ministry is still responsible.”

The same 30th anniversary [reports](#) on the Intelligence Ministry’s magazine indicated the Intelligence Ministry was focused on counter-espionage and combatting cyberattacks on Iran’s nuclear industry at the beginning of Alavi’s ministerial years. As one nuclear official put it at the time, “[i]f not for the Intelligence Ministry, our nuclear industry would have not been at the level it is today.” Alavi soon found himself [disagreeing](#) with the head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization (AEOI) Ali Akbar Salehi over alleged sabotage of nuclear facilities. Salehi [suspected](#) something more was afoot in their penetration of the complex, but Alavi dubbed the suspects as scrap metal thieves.

Alavi also took credit after the [freeing](#) of an Iranian diplomat—Noor Ahmed Nikbakht—who was kidnapped in Yemen in July 2013. He signaled that the operation to free Nikbakht was [implemented](#) “with the fewest possible casualties” and after the government had “refused the conditions set by the terrorists.” Iran’s Foreign Ministry [cited](#) the Intelligence Ministry’s deployment of a “special team” as being part of the successful operation. Alavi has also hailed the disruption of alleged terrorist plots during the Rouhani administration, including one in [2015](#) concerning “ten terrorist elements...sponsored by reactionary regional states” captured in provinces like Golestan, Tehran, Sistan and Baluchestan, [another](#) that was thwarted during the February 2016 parliamentary elections, and an additional one later that [summer](#), which, according to the Intelligence Ministry, involved a plan to bomb targets in Tehran.

But the next year, in June 2017, Iran suffered a devastating terror attack by the Islamic State on parliament and the Khomeini mausoleum, which killed 17 people. It was the [first](#) major attack on Iran since 2010 when Sunni militants killed 39 people at a mosque in Sistan and Baluchestan Province. Perhaps attempting to compensate for a failure to thwart the attack on high-value sites in Iran, Alavi came out days later claiming Iranian intelligence killed the mastermind of bombings, whom he claimed “was sent to hell by the Unknown Soldiers of the Imam of the Age.” He also disclosed later that summer that his forces had [eliminated](#) more than 100 terrorist organizations over the past four years.

Alavi doesn’t appear to have suffered any personal consequences following the June 2017 attack, as Rouhani [decided](#) to retain him as intelligence minister after he won reelection. Such a move also would not have happened without the supreme leader’s acquiescence, given that the last time a president attempted to remove an intelligence minister, which then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did with Heydar Moslehi, Khamenei [prevented](#) his firing. Turnover in the Intelligence Ministry is the rule—not the exception—in the Islamic Republic. The longest-serving intelligence minister to date was Ali Fallahian under then-President Rafsanjani. Every president since then—Khatami and Ahmadinejad—had around two intelligence ministers during their eight year tenures. Therefore, Alavi’s survival is a testament to the establishment’s continued

confidence in him.

But towards the end of his tenure, Iran experienced further lapses in security, including mysterious explosions at sensitive sites, like the Natanz nuclear facility, as well as the assassinations of senior Al-Qaeda operative Abu Muhammad al-Masri and the onetime head of the Organization for Defensive Innovation and Research Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. In keeping with his position, Alavi was summoned to parliament for briefings on some of these incidents. The *New York Times* [reported](#) that al-Masri lived in Tehran under the protection of the IRGC and then later the Intelligence Ministry itself, which Alavi headed. If al-Masri was under the protection of the Intelligence Ministry when he was assassinated, it would undermine Alavi's ministry's standing in Tehran. Perhaps in an attempt to deflect blame, after Fakhrizadeh's assassination a few months later, Iran's government quickly made it clear that the Intelligence Ministry had [warned](#) his IRGC protective detail about threats to his life weeks before his death. There is no public evidence to date of any senior-level shakeup in the ranks of Iran's security forces, but after these repeated incidents, it is clear Alavi's ministry is vulnerable to accusations of incompetence.

During his term as intelligence minister, Alavi played a behind-the-scenes role in managing Iran's Axis of Resistance. In 2016, he said that the IRGC [offered](#) the Assad family asylum in Iran, which it refused. There were also reports in 2019 that Alavi [met](#) with the [Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine at the Iranian embassy in Damascus as well as a [Hamas](#) delegation in Beirut. It appears his mission was to help unify the Palestinian factions, given a statement they released after the meeting which [emphasized](#) the "interlinked role of all Axis of Resistance forces and countries in the region to fight threats and schemes targeting Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon."

Alavi also weighed in on negotiations with the United States amid the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign, [saying](#) in 2019, "[h]olding talks with America can be reviewed by Iran only if Trump lifts the sanctions and our supreme leader gives permission to hold such talks. Americans are scared of Iran's military power, that is the reason behind their decision to abort the decision to attack Iran." Such a statement is important, as it showed Alavi deferring to the supreme leader on these matters. Iranian intelligence officials reportedly [participated](#) in talks with U.S. counterparts over the fates of the American hostages detained in Iran during the Obama administration. In addition, Alavi holds a seat on the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). Thus, he has been a player in national security decision-making during the Rouhani administration.

Despite Alavi's comments at the beginning of the Rouhani administration advocating against securitizing society and for a less draconian concept of targeting regime infiltration, he has been sure to protect his right flank. Alavi has [telegraphed](#) his ministry's efforts to stem the spread of Christian converts throughout Iran and was [sanctioned](#) by the United States for human rights abuses stemming from the Intelligence Ministry's role in suppressing the November 2019 gas protests. He has also [boasted](#) about how the ministry under his leadership has changed from a defensive to an offensive intelligence policy, and has announced high-profile busts of alleged spy networks. Alavi [proclaimed](#) in 2019 that Iran had discovered the identity of 290 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents and that "foreign intelligence services [who] recruit local people for spying were exposed and neutralized. The foreign services seeking to recruit Iranians have been disoriented by our discoveries." That summer it also [claimed](#) to have dismantled a spy network set up by the CIA, arresting 17 people who worked in sensitive agencies and economic sectors of the Islamic Republic. The director general of the Intelligence Ministry's counter-espionage department [said](#) that "[s]ome citizens were trapped by the U.S. exploitation of their visa requests and were encouraged to spy in exchange for receiving a visa. Some others were blackmailed by the CIA due to their need of maintaining or extending their visas." **Conclusion**

Such posturing of Alavi is indicative of the spymaster walking a careful balance throughout his career. He publicly signals the need for reforms, while doubling down on the regime's familiar playbook of paranoia and repression. It's this double game that allows him to survive and thrive in Tehran among both pragmatic and hardline elements. In the end, Alavi remains an enigmatic figure not just because of the nature of intelligence, but more importantly due to his ability to continue to ascend to the top ranks of the regime despite being dismissed and disqualified at various points in his political career. With the Rouhani administration nearing the end of its time in office, Alavi will continue to be a player within the system, as he will be a member of the Assembly of Experts until 2022, when he is up for reelection. The Guardian Council's [approval](#) of his candidacy for that seat in 2016 is evidence that he remains in good standing within Iran's unelected power centers. Previous intelligence ministers—like Ghorbanali Dorri-Najafabadi and Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i—have gone on to positions within the judiciary. Others—including Mohammad Reyshahri and Ali Fallahian—have run for president or have been appointed to additional posts by the supreme leader. Thus, Alavi's next steps will be important to monitor.