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AGHAZADEH: CRONYISM AT HOME AND POTENTIAL PRESSURE GROUPS ABROAD

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Abstract

The Iranian political system has distinctive characteristics, mostly related to its authoritarian nature and its complex structure fueled by ideology — and its inextricable relationship with a network of patronage and cronyism that partially depends on well-established Shiite traditions. Accordingly, the aghazadeh phenomenon has emerged. It is not merely a social and political phenomenon related to patronage and corruption. The study raises questions about the role of aghazadehs in Iranian politics and the foreign agenda they embrace, as they often form lobbying groups through which Iran achieves its interests on the international arena. The study also argues that aghazadehs constitute tools of pressure in the hands of the political system — even if aghazadehs seem to have experiences and perceptions different from the ideological vision of the political system. However, the Western powers do not pay heed to the danger they pose to serve their own interests. The study discusses the aghazadeh phenomena through analyzing this concept and the nature of the phenomenon amongst Shiite clerics; the rise of the aghazadeh phenomenon and its manifestations in Iran after the 1979 revolution; aghazadehs overseas; and finally the role of aghazadehs outside Iran.

Keywords: *Aghazadeh, pressure groups, cronyism.*

Aghazadeh (noble-born — a word referring to the children of the Iranian elite) has been extensively used by columnists, analysts, political and social activists and even ordinary Iranians in Iranian political and social discourse over the past two decades. In a nutshell, *aghazadeh* can refer to those who are born to rich, extravagant, and powerful officials. The term entered Iranian colloquialism in the 1990s. It refers also to the children of the elite who turn out to be men or women of influence and wealth. Unlike the past four decades, before the Shiite clerical system was approved and clerics took over power in Iran, this word had a negative connotation. Despite its essential linguistic meaning, the word is used to define political, economic, and governmental profiteering by parents. Or, however, it is better to say that the word refers to the exploitation of blood and marriage kinship relationships. This exploitation and benefiting might be in various spheres, whether in politics, economics, society or the private sphere. Each sphere will differ depending on the individual's reality. To avoid misunderstanding, we should indicate that the word *daukhterzadeh* refers to the same as *aghazadeh* but for women. It refers to daughters of officials within the Iranian government. But the word *aghazadeh* is generally used in political and media discourse. Due to the prevailing patriarchy in Iran, it is quite normal to use the word *aghazadeh*.

As to the phenomenon of *aghazadeh*, the media focuses on how far they live in luxury and profiteer economically — this is its explicit aspect. *Aghazadeh*, however, include implicit aspects: reaching out to the political system and exercising secret diplomacy (the diplomacy of pressure) on behalf of the Iranian government worldwide. The study aims to address the implicit aspects of *aghazadeh*.

1. Aghazadeh: Its Concept and Culture Amongst Shiite Clerics

Many significant developments in Iran, before and after the eruption of the 1979 revolution, have impacted the concept of *aghazadeh*. The general concept of *aghazadeh* and its culture amongst the Shiite clerics are explained as follows:

1.1 The Concept of Aghazadeh

The most important accomplishment of modern governments and democracy is obliterating racial inequality and the phenomenon of noble born people (*aghazadeh*). In light of the phenomenon of *aghazadeh*, the culture of merit became meaningless — with it manifested in hereditary and tribal structures. Unlike past systems, where aristocrats exclusively controlled the production of knowledge and monopolized it, it is impossible today to monopolize knowledge under modern governments. It is no longer possible for the ruling class to elevate their relatives to the rank of “elite or aristocrat” as was the case in the past.⁽¹⁾

In fact, it is worth noting that following the establishment of modern governments and their commitment to ensure knowledge and education are fairly distributed and accessible, government positions are no longer confined to aristocrats. Common people in urban, suburban or rural areas are now able to access all spectrums of knowledge: cultural, scientific, and historical. They can benefit almost equally from educational facilities, and use free e-learning platforms — relatively available to all people.

Thus, claiming today that a specific group enjoys “superior genetic traits” is blatant discrimination intending to elevate the aghazadeh from a low level to one of wealth and power. In fact, aghazadeh has lost its traditional reference to aristocrats in society. It is no longer necessary that it should be linked to aristocracy. Today, aghazadeh can refer to thieves, assailants and even murderers — while exploiting their links to power brokers. As for traditional aristocrats, there had been a need for them to prove their chivalry and aristocracy for social reasons, particularly in the military, political and even scientific fields. However, present-day aristocrats are no longer obliged to prove their honor and morals nor defeat their peers. The reason for this is clear: human communities no longer need to search for moral exemplars or superheroes who claim to represent God. Today’s intellectual thought has renounced the idea that aristocrats represent God’s shadow on Earth.

1.2 The Culture of Aghazadeh Amongst Shiite Clerics

The phenomenon of aghazadeh is one of the common and well-established traditions amongst Shiite marjas and clerics. A marja or cleric is called *gha* or *seyyed*. Their male children are called *aghazadeh*. This word has historically indicated multiple positive meanings across vast segments of society. There were several reasons for the popular acceptance of *aghazadehs* back then; patriarchy and religion were deeply connected and entrenched in society and other reasons due to the limitations of the study, cannot be listed.

According to unrecorded traditions, the term aghazadeh was defined in the beginning to refer to aides, advisers, and directors of the affairs of the house of the *seyyed* or marja. They gradually learned to manage the internal and external relations of the house. After the father — *seyyed* or marja — dies, his son inherits his economic, social, and political legacy. This tradition continues to be pursued in Iran. There are living examples such as Hassan Khomeini and the son of Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri.

Aghazadehs’ political, economic, and cultural influence is directly linked to the stature of their father (*seyyed*). However, following the clerical takeover in Iran, because of the disputes between the clerics, the standing of aghazadehs changed. Some of them joined the opposition against the theocratic regime dominating power in line with Khomeini’s vision. Aghazadeh lost their stature. Several of them shifted to normal life such as Mujtaba Taleghani, son of prominent cleric Mahmoud Taleghani who was one of the main members of

the Revolutionary Council.⁽²⁾ Some of them were executed or killed — foremost among them was Hossein Jannati who was executed over his affiliation with the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran, or the *Mujahedin-e-Khalq*. However, his father Ahmad Jannati, a prominent political figure, continued to maintain his stature as agha and seyyed. His other children also managed to keep their stature.⁽³⁾ Ali Jannati is also Ahmad Jannati's son. He has held various posts in Iran's political system for many years. He was appointed as Iran's minister of guidance, and was the country's ambassador to Kuwait. In addition, he was the minister of interior's political deputy. Meanwhile, other clerics voluntarily relinquished — along with their sons — the stature of seyyed and agha such as Shariatmadari.⁽⁴⁾

In general, it can be said that the phenomenon of aghazadeh spread beyond the official structure of the government — before the theocratic system's pillars were established. The unfair distribution of political, economic and social power occurred but on a limited scale. After the downfall of the Pahlavi monarchy, the aghazadehs expanded gradually to other classes beyond the clerics. Amid the growing political, social, and economic clout of the clerics, the aghazadehs turned to the public space to gain influence with the theocratic ruling system. The sons of those recognized as *marja al-taqlid* (source of imitation) and influential clerics such as Golpaygani, Mesbah-Yazdi, Jannati, Davani, Mar'ashi Najafi, Mohammad-Taqi Bahjat Foumani, Vaez-Tabasi, Alamolhoda, Mahdavi Kani, Rafsanjani, Larijani, Mofatteh and Motahari— were all born to elites. They inherited the economic, social, and political power of their fathers. This overlapping network of aghazadehs; kinship and marriage bonds amongst Shiite clerics turned into a critical problem inside the Iranian ruling system and government.

2. The Growth of Aghazadeh Phenomena and Its Manifestations in the Post-1979 Revolution

After the clerics took over power in Iran, the word aghazadeh evolved with new connotations. Before establishing the Iranian republic, the aghazadehs in most cases held posts as deputies and directors of internal affairs at the house of seyyed. When Khomeini was the head of state, Ahmed Khomeini — as an aghazadeh — managed to partially seize power. He was an effective and influential player on Iran's political landscape. However, the word aghazadeh continued to have the same meaning in Iran's political and social discourse. After Khomeini died and Khamenei ascended to power, this phenomenon of aghazadeh changed gradually. In the beginning, the aghazadehs were mainly benefiting from the country's economy. In the new millennium, the aghazadehs entered the political arena.

1.1 The Aghazadehs in the Economy

These changes started in the post-Iran-Iraq War era; the post-war reconstruction

period was when the IRGC entered the economic arena. The new generation of aghazadehs began engaging in the economy through an illegal relationship with the commanders of the IRGC — enabled by their clerical fathers or those working inside the political system (the army and government). They managed to amass surprising amounts of wealth. “Since then, economic and political corruption has been connected with the aghazadehs,” explained Ali Rabiei, a security and intelligence official who worked as Mohammad Khatami’s security advisor — in his article for *Karvakargar* newspaper in 1998 entitled “Aghazadeh- Profiteering and Economic Corruption.”⁽⁵⁾

Furthermore, the electoral campaigns of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 and 2009 were the most important entry points for such discourse in the political, social, and economic spheres in Iran. Ahmadinejad and his supporters raised the issue of economic corruption and pointed fingers at Akhar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s sons and Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri.⁽⁶⁾

Economic corruption cases were leaked related to the sons of clerics and taqlid clerics such as the Sultan of Sugar and al-Makasib Company cases. In addition, allegations were levelled against Nasser Vaez-Tabasi, son of Abbas Vaez-Tabasi, who is the chairman of the Razavi Shrine and the supreme leader’s representative in Khorasan.⁽⁷⁾

Ahmadinejad, who rose to power by raising slogans such as combating corruption and ensuring social justice, paved the way for his relatives, in the shortest time possible through remaining close to the IRGC — to enter the network of profiteering and systematic economic corruption. His tenure can be considered as the period in which the aghazadehs started emerging from beyond the clerical class.

During Hassan Rouhani’s tenure, in the past decade, this phenomenon continued to have an octopus-like spread across the economic arena. And it is still continuing. Some of the aghazadehs have introduced themselves as “people with good genetics.”⁽⁸⁾ They have held different government and semi-government positions.

A 2013 analysis published by *Arman* newspaper regarding the Central Bank’s report indicated how deep the crisis is. According to this report, nearly 9 percent of Iran’s budget of 727,000 billion tomans — nearly 80,000 billion tomans — was paid in the form of facilitation services to the sons of elite officials or other individuals. There are no reports indicating whether this sum has been repaid to Iranian banks or not.⁽⁹⁾

When investigating the phenomenon of aghazadehs in the economic field, we find that it is not limited to one aspect, just like any other social phenomenon. This phenomenon cannot be limited to one simple reason or more. Yet, the roots of this phenomenon were not discussed in the aforementioned analysis. What concerns us most is the extent of

the aghazadehs' influence, at home, in the economy, their clandestine relationship with the system and the support they will provide to the current Iranian government. They are the bedrock for the aghazadehs overseas — an issue that we will discuss later.

The aghazadehs who benefited from the country's economy are numerous; they cannot be listed in this study. If one is eager to review all the aghazadehs who exploited the economy, he/she needs to conduct a detailed study in this regard. Due to the limitations of this study, I will only mention a few names who have had media coverage.⁽¹⁰⁾

■ **Mohammad Yassin Ramin**

Yassin Ramin is the son of Mohammad-Ali Ramin, a media advisor to former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Mahnaz Afshar's husband, a famous Iranian actress. He was the head of a company called Rayan Roshd Afzar Company (Rayan Roshd) — a company linked to the Iranian Red Crescent. The company acted as a middleman to import medicines amid economic sanctions at the time. Following a complaint filed by the Iranian Red Crescent, he was jailed in 2016 on the charge that he imported expired powdered milk. Six months later, he was released, but the issue is still under investigation.⁽¹¹⁾

■ **Hamid Reza Aref**

Hamid Reza Aref is the son of Mohammad Reza Aref, the vice president in the eighth Iranian cabinet and the chairman of the Reformists' Supreme Council. The remarks he made about his superior rank and distinguished characteristics invoked multiple reactions in Iran's political and media spheres. It is reported that he is a businessman and works in the information technology field. In 2005, Aref, 27-years-old at the time, was one of the individuals who brought the MTN Company from South Africa to Iran to sign an agreement to launch the country's second mobile network operator.

■ **Narges Rabiei**

The name of Narges Rabiei, the labor minister's daughter, came up in one of the presidential debates during the 2017 election. She is one of the most striking examples of

“people with good genetics” in Iran. Importing luxurious clothes from the UK and rumored reports about her profiteering from imports and sales was the reason she was put under the spotlight during the presidential debates.

■ **Elias Ghalibaf**

Elias is the son of Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the incumbent Parliament speaker. He is responsible for operating several media outlets such as Tehran Today, Radio Farda and others. According to a report by Khabaronline,

quoting his father, Elias participates in economic activities through the Mehr-e-Hashtom institute at Saadat Abad Boulevard. He has also contributed to establishing a series of schools.

1.2 Aghazadehs as Politicians and Intellectuals

Following the win of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election, Mehdi Karroubi, one of the presidential candidates back then, wrote an open letter to the supreme leader protesting against the meddling of the IRGC, the revolutionaries of the Guardian Council, and the aghazadeh in the election. In this letter, Karroubi, for the first time, mentioned Mojtaba Khamenei, son of Ali Khamenei, and son-in-law of the seventh Parliament speaker at the time Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, calling him “Son of Agha” who carried out secret and regular activities for the sake of a certain candidate.

He wrote, “News has spread about your revered son Mojtaba’s support for one of the candidates. I was worried about the recurrent reports for fear that this support could be related to your own viewpoint. But my past experiences and what I know well about you made me assured that this support is based on his personal viewpoint. Afterwards, I heard that one of the elites told you that the Son of Agha — your son — supports so-and-so. And that you told him that your son is Agha, not Son of Agha.”⁽¹²⁾ Mojtaba Khamenei should be considered the most important among the aghazadehs nowadays in Iran. He has a direct role in Iran’s overall policies. Discussing his role and stature requires a detailed study in a separate paper.

However, there are many aghazadehs in Iran’s social and political spheres; they have been endeavoring, unlike the aghazadehs in the economic sphere, to enter the political arena. Some of these aghazadehs have even become major bosses and well-known within the political system, including individuals like Ali Motahari, Sorna Sattari, Ali Jannati, Mahdi Khazali, Mohammad Reza, Alireza Beheshti, Mohammad Mehdi Tindgoyan, and Mohammad Mehdi Mofatteh. Some of these aghazadehs — as mentioned above — received more coverage from media outlets. In some way, they forged relations with political currents and figures in recent years.

■ Farid al-Din Haddad Adel

Farid al-Din is the son of former lawmaker Ghulam Ali Haddad-Adel. His most notable appearance on the political landscape was when he accompanied Ebrahim Raisi in the 12th presidential election — when Raisi went to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) to record an interview. Farid al-Din was there, which demonstrated his seriousness about entering the political arena. Of course, he has not been distant from political and media activities over the past years. He was a member of the panel that outlined policies for some conservative media outlets such as Banjarah, Muthalath and Javan weekly

newspaper. Farid al-Din also operates Farhang School, one of the most famous schools in Iran. His father is its founder.⁽¹³⁾

■ **Mohsen, Faezeh, Mehdi and Yasser Hashemi**

Mohsen Hashemi, son of the late Hashemi Rafsanjani, is one of the most controversial aghazadehs in Iran. His name is and has been — along with other members of his household —reverberating across society as “robbers of the public budget.” For 13 years, he had been the chairman and CEO of Tehran Metro company. He then entered the city council as he was put on the list of the “reformists.” He remained in the council until 2021.⁽¹⁴⁾

Faezeh is one of Rafsanjani’s daughters. In addition to her political activities, she has also carried out some media activities. Her presence in the fifth Parliament, her role as editor-in-chief of the banned magazine Zan and her imprisonment for six months on charges of spreading propaganda against the political system are among the main points when it comes to describing Faezeh Hashemi.⁽¹⁵⁾

As for Mehdi Hashemi, he was chairman of the Iranian Fuel Conservation Organization. He then headed to the UK to continue his education. When he was sentenced in 2015 to 10 years in prison on bribery charges, his father advised him to return to Iran.⁽¹⁶⁾

Yasser Hashemi is another son from the Hashemi household. His name is connected with Azad Islamic University and the Expediency Discernment Council. He was the head of his father’s office at the Expediency Discernment Council’s research center. At the same time, he was the head of the office of the board of trustees of Azad Islamic University. He lost both positions following his father’s death.⁽¹⁷⁾

■ **Mohammad Alikhani**

He is the son of Ghodratollah Alikhani, the former lawmaker representing Qazvin Governorate and one of the notables in this governorate. Mohammad Alikhani was a lawmaker representing Qazvin in the seventh Parliament. In the fifth term of the governorate’s council election, he managed to get on the city council after winning the required votes; he was backed by the “reformists.” He also served as the deputy head of the Transportation and Traffic organization in the Tehran Municipality and worked as an advisor to the minister of oil in the eleventh government.⁽¹⁸⁾

■ **Fatima Hussaini**

She is the daughter of Safdar Hosseini, the former head of the National Development Fund of Iran. She was born in 1985 and was elected to the Parliament after her name was placed on the “reformists” list. She said that she held a PhD during the parliamentary election campaign for Parliament, even though, she only holds a Master’s degree.⁽¹⁹⁾

■ The Araghchis

Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, former spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, served in different government positions, such as political assistant to the foreign minister, and Iran's ambassador to Tokyo. Araghchi has three sisters and three brothers. Most of the family's members work in business and trade. He lost his father when he was 17. Araghchi has two elder brothers — one of them is a member on the board of the Exporters Union and the other is a member of the Vendors Union. Araghchi's nephew, known as Seyed Ahmad Araghchi, served as the vice president of the Central Bank of Iran. He looked over foreign currencies from 2017 to 2018. After the fluctuations experienced by the foreign exchange market after Valiollah Seif's dismissal from his position as governor of Iran's Central Bank, he was dismissed as well, and then arrested and imprisoned.⁽²⁰⁾

■ Fatemeh Javadi

Fatemeh Javadi is the niece of Javadi Amoli, a famous cleric in Iran. She held the position of Iran's vice president and headed Iran's Environmental Protection Organization (IEPO) during the first government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. After being appointed to the latter position, she appointed her husband as her adviser. According to her, environmental protection was his field of study and he had experience regarding this matter.⁽²¹⁾

■ Meysam Mozaffar

He is the son of Hossein Mozaffar— a former lawmaker and one of the directors of Ghalibaf's election campaign. He served as the CEO of Tehran Taxi Organization for a while. In response to criticism regarding his son's appointment to the Tehran Taxi Organization, Hossein Mozaffar said, "In the past, Meysam was a deputy head in the culture and art authority in the municipality. Before this, he was deputy head of the municipality. Even before being appointed to these positions, he occupied positions that our ministers were never appointed to. Meysam was deprived of serving in senior positions because he is from the Mozaffar household. He has been working in the organization since he was 18. He was responsible for organizing meetings for 2,000 people. He was an adviser in the Kish Free Trade Zone project and the director general of Iran Students Union. He also served as a young adviser to the president and was a member of Iran's Information Technology Board and deputy head of the municipality's cultural organization. He was also nominated to become the head of a municipality in one of the regions."⁽²²⁾

3. The Aghazadehs Outside Iran

As we mentioned, if we wanted to count the aghas and aghazadehs linked to the Iranian political system, the number will be far greater than the

one announced by different Iranian media outlets at home and overseas. According to reports mostly issued by government linked news agencies over different periods, we estimate that the size of the aghazadeh community overseas ranges from 3,000 to 10,000 people. For example, a report, quoting members of the Education and Research Committee in the Iranian Parliament in April 2019, said that the number of aghazadeh members residing outside the country for studying purposes was 3,000.⁽²³⁾ Another source indicated that the sons of officials residing outside the country were nearly 5,000.⁽²⁴⁾ The Trump administration's Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin announced that the number of children of Iran's elite (aghazadehs) in the United States was nearly 5,500. In a remarkable statement, he concluded that the assets of the Iranian aghazadehs in the United States — immovable and personal assets—reached nearly \$150 billion (more than twice the foreign exchange reserves in Iran in 2020 according to statistics of the International Monetary Fund).⁽²⁵⁾ It is worth mentioning here that the remarks of the US treasury secretary were made in previous years, this amount of money is only monitored by US banks, so what about other countries! On the other side, Tabnak website — owned by Mohsen Rezaee — announced in a single report that the number of educated aghazadehs in the UK was about 4,000 individuals.⁽²⁶⁾

It stands to reason, given the huge numbers of aghazadeh community members, that the properties of aghas and their children residing abroad are much more than what they have in the United States. This is a clear proof of the mounting power of the lobbies of the Iranian government in Europe, South America and even in Asia. The young aghazadehs who are wasting their time on Instagram lack proper intellectual potency and social support to change or instrumentally influence international policies. The following are the names of some aghazadehs overseas who are sometimes mentioned in media outlets:⁽²⁷⁾

- **Maryam Fereydoun:** Daughter of Hassan Fereydoun who is former President Hassan Rouhani's younger brother, resides in London, and works as an accountant.
- **Ali Fereydoun:** Son of Hassan Fereydoun, works as a senior engineer at an educational company in New York to educate the city's poor citizens.
- **Tannaz Rouhani:** daughter of Hassan Rouhani. She is one of the four children of the former Iranian president. She now lives in Austria.
- **Seyed Hossein Mousavian:** A high-profile former Iranian nuclear negotiator. He served in different government positions after he graduated from the University of Sacramento in California. He is now a researcher at Princeton University.
- **Eissa Hashemi:** The son of Masoumeh Ebtekar who famously scaled the wall of the US embassy to storm it and was also an adviser to former President

Rouhani. His father, Mohammad Hashemi Esfahani, occupied the US embassy in the early days of the revolution. Eissa now resides along with his wife Maryam Tahmasi in the United States. The members of the aghazadeh community residing in Los Angeles all seem to be working in the academic field.

■ **Mahdi Zarif:** Son of the person who is possibly the clandestine founder of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC). This person is the son of former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Mahdi is in partnership with a company named Verison in the United States. And it is likely that he is one of the founders of NIAC.

■ **Sajjad Khoshroo:** Son of the Iranian ambassador to the UN. He is the son-in-law of Hossein Fereydoun and the husband of Maryam Fereydoun. In spite of the legal implications, he may have connections to money laundering networks within the government. He is now working to get a PhD from Oxford University. He is the son of Mr. Khoshroo Khoshbakht. Both of them are lawyers.

■ **Leila Khatami:** Daughter of former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. She resides in New York and seeks to maintain a top spot in social circles.

■ **Emadeddin Khatami:** Son of Mohammad Khatami and a member of the Central Council of the Union of Islamic Iran People Party. According to news agencies close to the IRGC, he left the country — possibly settling in the United States. It is worth noting that Narges Khatami is another daughter of Mohammad Khatami and has resided in the UK for years.

■ **Ehsan and Niloofar Nobakht:** Children of Ali Nobakht, who is a member of the Iranian Parliament. Both of them work as professors of medicine at George Washington University and UCL University. They are busy serving as citizens of the United States. Ali Nobakht is the brother of Mohammad Bagher Nobakht, Hassan Rouhani's aide and president of the Planning and Budget Organization under the government of prudence and hope.

■ **Fatemeh Larijani:** Daughter of long-serving lawmaker Ali Larijani, one of the Iranian officials constantly issuing death threats against the United States via chanting slogans such as "Death to America." Fatemeh resides in Ohio. She studies medicine.

■ **Sasha Sabhani:** Daughter of the former Iranian ambassador to Venezuela who lived a luxurious lifestyle there.

■ **Naeimeh Eshraghi:** Granddaughter of Ruhollah Khomeini. This hijab-wearing member of the aghazadeh community lives in Canada. She reportedly performs prayers in Canada better than she did in her homeland, Iran. Her name has come to the fore recently after she posted an anti-US Facebook status.

■ **Hossein and Hassan Shamkhani:** They are the sons of Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the National Security Council of Iran. Hossein, the elder son, is the director of a maritime navigation company. He graduated from a

US university. Both of them are not concerned with a certain country and shuttle between different countries continually. Ali's nephew, Mohamed Hadi, is also an expert on political affairs in Moscow.

■ **Mohsen Moradian:** Son of Mortaza Moradian, former Iranian ambassador to Denmark. The wedding party of this son — who married the Iranian model Anashid Hoseini — recently sparked media uproar.

■ **Mahmoud Reza Khavari:** The biggest trickster in the Iranian government's history: He, members of his family and his associates run a wide array of companies and commercial institutions in the furthest parts of the world. They run a giant group working in money laundering internationally, including a chain of restaurants in the United States and Canada and contracting companies in the Gulf states.

■ **Ehsan Tabish:** Son of Mohammad Reza Tabish, head of the top housing body under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He has served in different positions within the Iranian government. He enhances the interests of the government through his recreational trips abroad.

■ **Azadeh Haddad-Adel:** Daughter of Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel: She also has undertaken activities related to human development in the East and in the West, starting from Japan and then in America. She has worked to serve humanity. It is said that Gholam-Ali's son-in-law born in the United States hails from the family of a US martyr.

There are also other names of the aghazadeh community that appear in the media from time to time. They include: the six children of Saghaian-Nejad (the former head of Qom Municipality), nephew of Mostafa Tajzadeh, children of Mohammad Reza Khatami (brother of Mohammad Khatami), granddaughter of Mohammad Yazdi (former member of the Guardian Council and former chief justice), Zahra Takhshid, daughter of Mohammad Reza Takhshid (the “reformist” head of the faculty of law in Tehran).

Moreover, there is Nematallah Postinduz, the chief executive of Iran's automotive company SAPIA. He is close to Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei who was appointed — after his resignation from his position — as chairman of National Iranian Copper Industries Co. Aref, Nematallah's son, lives in Los Angeles.

If we want to mention each one of those involved in economic corruption respectively, we will be unable to get sufficient information about them. But there is still more to tell. The number of aghazadehs were leaked through media outlets not as a result of follow-up efforts by international tribunals or human rights advocacy groups, but because of personal and partisan score-settling between members of the different factions within the structure of the political system in Iran.

4. The Role of Aghazadehs Abroad

The aghazadehs have played a significant role for Iran abroad that can be unfolded as follows:

4.1 Pressure groups for the Political System

The Iranian government, formed in 1979, sought — like all governments— to expand and enhance relations with other countries. But this was not as easy as was imagined in the beginning. The treaties and equations concluded before Khomeini and the clerics assumed power in Iran did not last due to the internal complexities of the 1979 revolution and the country's multilayered policies towards the regional and global powers. Attacks, like storming the US embassy, revealed that there was no channel of communication established in parallel with regular diplomatic relations to facilitate international relations.

This communicative vacuum was more evident in the Iran-Iraq War. The government sent multiple delegations to different countries to purchase weapons and ammunition. The delegations' efforts came to naught due to the arms embargo. Iranian officials gradually felt the necessity to establish lobbies to circumvent restrictive international laws. Over time, the Iranian government managed to accomplish this goal with the help of other governments like Gaddafi's in Libya.

But after several years, Iran added other departments to its lobbying platforms. These new departments had to be managed by new pressure groups and clients. They had to turn threats into opportunities. This would not have happened without the aghazadehs.

The aghazadehs, who were not born before the establishment of the Iranian republic, their fate and mission has been assigned since their birth. They were spread across the world to entrench the clout of the Iranian political system to the maximum extent possible while enjoying the petrodollar extravaganza, taking selfies beside swimming pools and driving luxury cars. They spread across the world, introducing themselves as the extravagant aristocratic guards of the Iranian republic and expanded the government's court as much as possible. In fact, the aghazadehs are an oligarchy and they became known as the privileged. This group has only become the explicit representation of the aghazadeh phenomenon, but the main part of the iceberg of the aghazadehs (the greatest part of the aghazadeh community) continues their work implicitly as pressure groups — away from public attention and the uproar of the media.

4.2 A Network to Circumvent Sanctions

Through registering multiple companies in recent years, the aghazadehs have established a complicated and coherent economic network that bypasses sanctions and restrictions. They are directly connected to the global trade network and make little effort to establish communication links with the

banking network inside Iran. Definitely, no country will object to attracting massive investments to allow hard currencies to flow into its economic cycle. It is also logical that countries should not ban the activities of legal and registered companies which have not committed any breach.

Given the abovementioned observations, it can be said that the Iranian government has not only had one treasury in recent decades for its hard currency, but has had two treasuries. These are run by officials from Iran's political system and aghazadehs overseas. In addition, it had been alleged that the reasons behind seizing billions via government officials, sending petrodollars to European and Canadian banks and so on have become clearly understood. It has also been understood why none of the senior officials can be sued.

4.3 Bridges to Communicate With Opponents

It should be said that the aghazadeh phenomenon in Iran is related to the principle of pressure groups. This is because in the end, neither the structure of the political system nor the international supporters of the Iranian political system are ready to terminate these clandestine bridges. Therefore, neither Iran's foes who benefit from the aghazadeh pressure groups nor those who superficially criticize the political system display much objection to this phenomenon. For instance, on August 30, 2019, Mashregh News wrote that the aghazadeh crisis in Iran reaches new heights day after day.⁽²⁸⁾

The phenomenon turns into a hotly debated question in Iran's media outlets each time a new issue arises. It has recently been revealed that all the six children of Mr. Saghalian-Nejad, the president of Qom Municipality, lived and studied in the United States. As usual, the reports generated public backlash. In the end, the head of the municipality said — in response to the public outrage — “My family serves Velayat-e Faqih and the sect, and care about observing morals. Some of my children traveled abroad to acquire scientific knowledge. All of them have become ambassadors of the government.” Meanwhile, one of this official's sons spoke in an interview with an anti-revolutionary network, making strange remarks that have nothing to do with his father describing him as a “revolutionary.” Hamed Saghalian-Nejad, introduced by his father as an ambassador of Iran's political system, preferred to speak to Manoto (Me and You) television network – an anti-Iran network – instead of to state-run media outlets. He received questions from Masih Alinejad. Second, he totally contradicted the remarks of his father. He announced explicitly in the interview, “I have an opinion different from that of my father. Maybe when he expressed his viewpoint it was for domestic consumption. I am not an ambassador for the government. I am an ordinary citizen.”

The aforesaid is just one of hundreds of other controversial episodes that have emerged in recent years; Iranian officials played a role in diverting the public's attention from the country's main issues through promoting such circuses.

Through the media, the government puts officials under pressure and tightens the noose around them. It prepares reports for domestic consumption that are directed to the traditional supporters of the political system. Following the first report, another report is prepared with the aim of stirring up public opinion against nominal and actual opponents to the political system — whether at home or overseas. In reality, the government seeks to play both sides against the other. In other words, the government's legitimacy should not be hampered, nor should the popularity of its opponents. The stature of the lobbies formed overseas maintain their standing as groups committed to maintaining human rights and individual freedoms — as well as the stature of the aghazadehs who serve within the structure of the government. Moreover, any member of the aghazadeh community who manages to present himself as a civilized person who is committed to human rights and clearly convinces the opposition that he defected from the political system (even if he needs to denounce his own father) will have a greater chance to spread the revolution's aspirations beyond Iran's borders, double his petrodollars and expand his circle of supporters amongst the opposition groups and even amongst the religious and ethnic groups.

4.5 Oversea Supporters to Protect the Political System

The controversial reports related to the aghazadehs' studying or undertaking economic activities in the West always provoke uproar in Iran's media for a certain period of time. However, it should be said that all this uproar was not to hold the officials accountable or end the phenomenon of the aghazadeh. But the political system did this in order to create an ambiguous media landscape aimed at tarnishing the image of some officials for political, partisan, and even personal score-settling. The greatest part of the audience often concluded that these conflicting reports are a result of partisan or even personal score-settling between politicians of the Iranian government. Meanwhile, they are unaware of the unbreakable chain that binds together all the elements of the political system with unbelievable strength.

It is natural to analyze retrospectively to have a better understanding of the entrenched pillars of the Iranian political system in different countries over four decades. Only then will we realize that several of yesterday's aghazadehs have become aghas and elites. We will even realize that several of the government's allies overseas who are not apparently considered aghazadehs who protect the Iranian political system.

4.5 The West Inaction in Addressing the Aghazadeh Phenomena

Dual behavior marks the policy of Western governments towards the aghazadeh community and the growth of Iranian lobbies in the West. Despite expressing their resentment over the aghazadehs, Western governments have exerted scant efforts to curb the influence of aghazadeh community members.

In fact, their position on the aghazadehs is predictable and pragmatic. It is the result of the continued international diplomatic pressure on Iran on the one hand and the efforts of global companies and institutions on the other to extract the biggest possible portion of natural and human resources from colonized countries like Iran.

The most recent reaction related to the aghazadeh community came from former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. He announced that he was considering the matter regarding the presence of children belonging to Iranian officials in the United States. He also wrote a post on his Twitter account, saying: "The individuals busy destroying the lives of the Iranians were sending their sons overseas to complete studying, shopping and benefiting from the freedoms in the US."⁽²⁹⁾ In light of these remarks, former US envoy on Iran at the US Department of State, Brian Hook, used the term "expelling" in an investigation on the extradition of children belonging to Iranian government officials. He considered the presence of children belonging to Iranian officials in the United States as "hypocrisy."⁽³⁰⁾

However, none of the aforementioned US politicians had the desire to cut the aghazadeh community out of the equation of the ongoing ploys between the two sides. No Iranian official has expressed shame, nor has any child of an Iranian government official relinquished their extravagant lifestyle in the West.

The reactions of European officials have been no different when compared to the Americans. They showed even greater heedlessness and sometimes organized their political meetings with the government in Iran via aghazadeh backchannels.

5. Conclusion

The issue of aghas and aghazadehs within the Iranian political system and exposing some of the negative personalities among them in the media who are not major actors whether in terms of social legitimacy or political popularity, is only the visible tip of the iceberg of the Iranian lobbies. The rest of the iceberg reaches out to international arenas across the globe; they cannot be counted. Many of us know nothing about them. The aghazadehs, in this equation, only play the role of the government's money broker. Aghazadehs often operate in clandestine lobbies that can cause major shifts in regional and global arenas. This fact is not hidden from the international community, which sees no reason to prevent the aghazadehs from enjoying the splendors of the Western world. The aghazadehs do not care about who rules the Western countries as long as they provide safe and secure banks for their money. What is important here is the issue of the dollars deposited in the banks of Canada, the United States and Europe. On the other side, the aghazadeh community members make up the lobbies who play a mediating role in international policy.

Endnotes

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