

Iran Ousts Top Security Official Tainted by Spy Scandal

Ali Shamkhani was one of the most powerful men in Iran, but it was not enough to insulate him after a close associate was accused of selling information to Britain.

By Farnaz Fassihi

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Iran on Monday removed its top national security official, one of the most powerful men in the country, after he came under scrutiny over his close ties with a high-ranking British spy.

The security official, Ali Shamkhani, had been secretary of the Supreme National Council, which shapes Iranian security and foreign policy, for a decade, and before that worked at the Defense Ministry. The spy, Alireza Akbari, a dual British citizen, was Mr. Shamkhani's deputy at the ministry and then worked as an adviser to him on the council.

In 2019, as suspicions about Mr. Akbari arose, Mr. Shamkhani lured him back to Iran from Britain, where he had moved, leading to his arrest and execution in January.

Mr. Shamkhani appeared to have not only survived but thrived after the scandal until his sudden ouster on Monday. In March, he spearheaded Iran's negotiations to restore ties with Saudi Arabia, with the mediation of China, and he also acted as a diplomat traveling to neighboring Arab countries in the Persian Gulf to strengthen trade and political relations.

But on Monday, the Islamic Republic demonstrated once again that not even its most loyal servants are immune from being ousted from power. In a decree, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, removed Mr. Shamkhani from his post and thanked him for his service. He replaced him with a senior naval commander of the Revolutionary Guards with little experience in civilian politics.

Last June, Iran also removed the head of the Guards intelligence unit, Hossein Taeb, after a series of covert attacks and assassinations in Iran linked to Israel suggested that Iranian intelligence circles had been compromised.

Iranian analysts said a number of controversies had contributed to Mr. Shamkhani's ouster.

He was accused of corruption amid allegations that his family raked in millions of dollars through an oil shipping business helping Iran evade sanctions. He was also blamed for the failure of the talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal.

The council was also criticized for the handling of domestic turmoil in the monthslong uprising demanding the ouster of the ruling clerics, with the majority of Iranians seeing Mr. Shamkhani complicit in the violent crackdowns that killed hundreds of protesters — and with supporters of the government criticizing his leadership as not being harsh enough.

Beyond that, the hard-line faction now in control of Parliament and the presidency saw him as too close to the previous governments, which were centrist and reformist, and so did not trust him.

“There was pressure building on Mr. Khamenei from the hard-line faction and public opinion to remove Mr. Shamkhani,” Gheis Ghoreishi, a political analyst close to the government, said in a telephone interview from Iran. “He resisted for a while but the lobbying became too loud.”

In announcing the dismissal, Mr. Khamenei said he was appointing Mr. Shamkhani as a member of the Expediency Council, which largely advises the supreme leader. The appointment is viewed as largely ceremonial; in past years other officials who had fallen out with Mr. Khamenei, including former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have also been named to the council to save face.

Mr. Shamkhani's ability to weather the spy scandal storm for as long as he did may have been the result of an agreement between Mr. Khamenei and the Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, analysts said.

“There was a give-and-take deal between the government of President Raisi and the supreme leader to allow Mr. Shamkhani to redeem his public standing after the Akbari scandal with the Saudi deal,” one political analyst, Sasan Karimi, said in an interview from Tehran.

In a separate decree on Monday, Mr. Khamenei gave the Supreme National Council post to Gen. Ali Akbar Ahmadian, 62, a former deputy commander in chief of the Guards naval unit and a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war. He was described by Iranian media as a top military strategist who was also in charge of coordinating the armed forces of the Guards.

Although Mr. Khamenei always has the last word on important state policies, from negotiations with the United States to the domestic uprising against the ruling clerics, the role of the national security adviser is influential, analysts said. General Ahmadian does not have much experience in foreign policy or domestic national security issues.

“Shamkhani’s successor has no experience working with anyone outside the military,” said Ali Vaez, the Iran director for the Crisis Group. “It’s a steep learning curve. There may be a reset or delays on key issues such as the future of the nuclear deal, the detainee negotiations with the U.S. and regional diplomacy.”

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