

Associate Paper

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Two Mashhads: A Discursive Rivalry in Iran's Holiest City

Mehdi Nourian

FDI Associate

Key Points

- Mashhad is the holiest city in Iran and among the holiest sites in Shi'a Islam.
- There are two discourses shaping two different ways of life in Mashhad: the "shrine discourse" and the "secular discourse".
- Political support since 1979 has allowed the shrine discourse to overshadow every other aspect of the city, placing the two discourses at loggerheads and making their co-existence very difficult.
- Ebrahim Raisi, an ultra-conservative hardliner who has previously been the custodian of the Shrine of Imam Reza, in Mashhad, is now the President of Iran.
- Raisi is also the son-in-law of Ahmad Alamolhoda, the city's influential Friday-prayer leader and the envoy of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to Razavi Khorasan Province, which contains Mashhad.
- The increasing dominance of a discourse with totalitarian characteristics could expand from Mashhad to the whole country under Raisi's administration.

Summary

Studying Mashhad as the holiest city in Iran has been important since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Knowing about the city has become more significant, however, after the landslide victory of Ebrahim Raisi, the custodian of the shrine of the eighth Imam of Shi'a Muslims and

its various institutions in Mashhad, in Iran's 2021 presidential election. Raisi is, additionally, the son-in-law of Ahmad Alamolhoda, the city's Friday-prayer leader. Alamolhoda is also the envoy of Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in the Razavi Khorasan Province where Mashhad is. In this article, I describe a discursive rivalry between two discourses in the city. I also try to set the tone for where this rivalry is going. At the end, I explain how the increasing dominance of a discourse with totalitarian characteristics, could expand from Mashhad to the whole country under Raisi's administration.

I have identified an expansive rivalry between two discourses in Mashhad. I call the first one the shrine discourse and the second, the secular discourse. The two discourses have shaped two different ways of life. They have brought about two Mashhads: a holy Mashhad and a secular Mashhad. I argue that the political support for the former in recent decades has led to its increased dominance over the latter. I do not argue for or against either discourse, since both belong in the public domain. Rather, I take a stand against the idea that political forces favour a particular discourse, thereby oppressing "other" ways of life.

Analysis

The co-existence of different ways of life may seem natural in a pluralistic and democratic culture where the values and practices of minority cultures are accepted by the dominant one. In such a society, people can maintain their unique identities regardless of the values and practices of the dominant culture. But Mashhad bears no resemblance to such a society. The dominance of the ideology of political Islam for over four decades has allowed the shrine discourse to overshadow every other aspect of the city, placing the two discourses at loggerheads and making their co-existence very difficult. In the following paragraphs, I try to describe the two discourses based on observations from my last journey to Mashhad.

Mashhad has always been considered as a holy city by many Iranians. Going to Mashhad, for most Iranians, is akin to making a pilgrimage to a shrine since it is the resting place of Imam Reza, the only Shi'ite Imam buried in the country. Even its name implies that Mashhad is a sacred city; Mashhad is an Arabic word that is derived from *shahadat*, meaning "martyrdom". Shi'a Muslims believe that their Imam, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, was poisoned at the hands of the Abbasid caliph, al-Ma'mun, in 818 AD. The Imam was buried in a village that in time became Mashhad.

The dominance of the shrine discourse has made Mashhad a holy place and the journey to the city a pilgrimage. The discourse makes everything related to the city holy. Even what you buy from Mashhad is believed to bring blessings for you. Along with "Karbala'i", the title given to a person who makes the pilgrimage to the holy city of Karbala in Iraq, and "Hajji", the title given to one who makes the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, a person who makes a pilgrimage to Mashhad is given the title of "Mashhadi". Making a pilgrimage to Mashhad is sometimes called "Hajj for the poor" or, in Persian, "Hajj-e-Foghara". This refers to the fact that Hajj is an expensive journey and few people can afford it. But going to Mashhad is much cheaper. In small cities and in villages in Iran, the title Mashhadi still exists and brings social status. "Mashdi", "Mashti" or "Mash" are the

contracted forms of “Mashhadi”. They are also used to praise someone for his courage, generosity, manhood, virility and other positive behavioural characteristics.

Considering the pre-constructed stereotype of Mashhad as merely a holy site for pilgrims, which is highly interwoven with an ideological perspective towards the city and is constructed within the Shi’a discourse, made me look for an alternative, or rival, discourse in my latest journey. I found it somewhere not very far from the shrine. Geographically, it is somewhere in the northwest of the city, about six kilometres from the shrine, somewhere about the Khayyam Boulevard. As we head from the shrine towards this area, we see the transition between the two discourses, or the two Mashhads. Somewhere between the two discourses, the fluidity of the dominant shrine discourse is eminent, and going further, an alternative discourse that I call the secular discourse or the second Mashhad gradually appears.

As we travel from the first Mashhad towards the second Mashhad, the population density decreases, but the traffic increases. That is because there are more private cars compared to taxis or buses. Like other cities in Iran, in Mashhad, taxis can pick up four passengers and buses many more. Therefore, fewer taxis and buses, and more private cars lead to less population but more traffic. There is no sign of cars and buses full of people and no sign of places full of people like what is very common around the shrine. Unlike around the shrine where most of the cars are economy and entry-level, in this part of the city, most of the cars are luxurious, or at least much more expensive. There is no sight of untidy and messy banners on the streets around the shrine announcing the time and date for religious meetings full of Hajji and Karbalai titles. Departing from the first Mashhad shows you more young couples and less family. If you do see a family, they are driving their expensive SUVs, exploring and enjoying the city, heading towards luxurious shopping malls like ProMa, HyperMe, Almas-e-Shargh and Alton Tower. In this Mashhad, families do not have to walk among immigrants or pilgrims, including Arabs and Afghans, sweating in traditional markets like Sarshoor, Abbas-Gholi-Khan, Al-Ghadir or even the Reza low-level mall around the shrine, full of cheap products.

Seeing women as drivers is another scene you hardly ever see around the shrine. However, women drivers could be seen much more in the second discourse. Unlike around the Imam Reza’s shrine, here the *chador* is not the absolute or almost absolute women’s clothing any longer. Wearing a chador for the women visiting the shrine is a must. You will be given a piece of chador at the entrance of the shrine if you are not wearing one. One of the duties of the servants known as the “Khuddam” in the shrine is to enforce hijab rules for women, including not wearing any make-up.

Immigrant Arabs and Afghans are barely seen in the second Mashhad. They serve as labourers, caretakers, servants and waiters. People try to control their accents and do their best to get as close as possible to the Tehrani accent, as spoken in the capital, Tehran, and which is the basis of standard Iranian Persian. You can hear foreign music, mostly American, from cars, compared to religious songs around the shrine which are called “Maddahi”. Maddahi is a ceremonial singing peculiar to Shi’a Muslims. A person who performs Maddahi is called “Maddah”. Maddahs are given the titles of Hajji, Karbalai and Mashhadi. Maddahis

are performed on Shi'a Imams' birthdays or death anniversaries. Most Maddahs are men. However, a few women sing Maddahi in all-women gatherings. In Shi'a rulings, it is not permissible for a woman to sing in front of men and, accordingly, a man must not listen to a woman singing. In the secular discourse, you hear foreign women singers from cars, something considered a taboo in the dominant discourse of the shrine.

As we move from the first Mashhad to the second one, the townscape gradually changes. It seems that here Western brands are culturally permissible to show off: Pierre Cardin, Sketchers, Jumeirah, Rado, Salomon, Nike, Adidas, etc. Taking photos with the Imam Reza's shrine in the background is one of the favourite activities for pilgrims who go to Mashhad. There are stores around the shrine that facilitate that activity. They have painted backgrounds of the shrine or portraits of Imam Reza in their businesses and use them as the background of the pilgrims' photographs. There are also paintings on religious stories; for example, the story of Imam Reza's martyrdom by al-Ma'mun. Some of the stores also have Arabic clothes. Some pilgrims wear them and take photos with them so that they look like Arabs. The stores employ advertisers to attract the pilgrims. They shout "photo with the Shine". In the secular discourse, there is no sign of such places. Rather, there are luxurious and modern ateliers for photography. People can go to such places, located in modern buildings, see sample photos in albums, offer their favourite ones, and then get photographed. They can wear modern clothes, hold modern objects, or have modern sceneries in the background.

Another noticeable difference between the two Mashhads is the shop signs. Shop signs are in Persian, Arabic and English. Around the shrine, most of the shop signs use Arabic and Persian, or only Arabic. On the contrary, in the secular Mashhad, most of the shop signs are in English and Persian, or only English. For example, pharmacies around the shrine have shop signs which read "saydalia" in Arabic and "darookhaneh" in Persian, meaning drugstore. Arabs understand *saydalia* and, since there are a lot of Arabs in the shrine's vicinity, you see the word in Arabic. However, shop signs of drugstores far from the shrine and somewhere within the secular discourse territory, read "drugstore" and "darookhaneh". Unlike *saydalia*, "drugstore" is not to inform people about the place, telling them here is where you can buy medicines. In the second Mashhad, almost everyone knows Persian and there is no need for "drugstore" as they can read the "darookhaneh". Therefore, "drugstore" plays a different role. The "drugstore" is to face down the "saydalia"; a sign of revenge.

This is also true about names, including the names of restaurants. Heading towards the second Mashhad, you no longer see "mateam", an Arabic word for a restaurant. In the secular Mashhad, instead, the restaurant signs read "fast food" or "restaurant" in English. Here, most of the names are Western ones or, at most Persian, but not Arabic. Karbala Kebab, Layali Lebanon Restaurant, Al-Zahra Mateam, and Syria Mateam are replaced with Pachino Fastfood, Silvana Restaurant, Me Chef Restaurant, Potato Time and Lord Italian. Even the Arabic word "Karim", in one of the most famous restaurants in Mashhad, Pesaran-e-Karim, has nothing to do with religious discourse. According to the restaurant's website, it has been named after its founder, Karim Ghasemzadeh Hatami. Karim is a given name of Arabic origin that means generous or noble. In the Shi'a Muslim discourse, "Karim" is used to

praise some Imams for their generosity and nobility. “Karim” in this discourse is used in a secular manner, while just about six kilometres away, it is used in its religious context.

Around the shrine, there are shops selling handicrafts. They are not called handicrafts though, since this name is a secular one and secularism has no place in this discourse. Handicrafts in the dominant discourse of the shrine are called “cultural products”. Culture in the “cultural products” phrase is also defined within the dominant discourse of the Shrine, with a particular reading. All of these products have something in common with the shrine discourse. All of them have a Shi’a theme. They range from Quranic calligraphies to three-dimensional models of the shrines of Shi’a Imams. In the other discourse, however, there are art galleries. They insist on being called “art galleries”. The very name is used even when they write it in Persian and they do not translate it. When I stepped into one, a young boy welcomed me. He was wearing a T-shirt with a modern painting on it and a pair of classic glasses. He asked for my phone number so that he could add me to a Telegram Channel. He said I could place an offer online and they will deliver it anywhere I wanted. The shop was full of pictures and paintings of the Champs-Élysées, the Eiffel Tower, New York and Tokyo. There were no pictures or paintings of Imam Reza’s shrine or any other religious sites. No religious calligraphies. There was a large Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” on the wall, which attracted my attention. The art gallery had no indication of the Mashhad I used to know.

In the shrine discourse, there are a lot of traditional coffeehouses or “qahvehkhaneh(s)”. They are important social gatherings for men. Only in a few of them are women allowed, considering that they should go with their families. In contrast to its name, coffee is not served in a coffeehouse. The coffeehouses usually serve tea, omelettes and an Iranian traditional stew called “dizi”. The hookah is traditionally offered in some of them as well. Most of the coffeehouse-goers come from the labour class. The alternative to coffeehouses in the other discourse is the coffee shop, or café. The names of Mashhad’s cafés say everything: Delicio Café, Rose Café, Kian Café, Vanilla Café, Pipe Café, Barista Café, etc. I went to the Kian Café. It was a small and cosy place. The owner was a young boy who tried very hard to control his Mashhadi accent. While speaking Persian, he insisted on using English words in his sentences. For instance, when I was talking to him about one of the coffees on the menu, he tried to use the English word “recipe” frequently. There was a chalkboard on the wall, on which you could find the menu including the prices. His place was designed like a wooden cottage. His café was full of foreign brands, including Lavazza, Starbucks, Snickers, Mars and Twix. Almost nothing was Iranian. Although we were in the holiest city in the country, Mashhad, you couldn’t find any religious signs in the place. There was also a laptop that was wirelessly connected to speakers and playing popular music. Now, how does the shrine discourse dominate the secular one, thereby marginalising its ways of life?

Mashhad is known as a stronghold for hardliners in the country. Raisi’s father-in-law is undoubtedly the most prominent of them. As the leader’s envoy in the province, Alamolhoda has great influence over the province’s different state organisations and institutions. His full authority in the province allows him to meddle in municipal affairs. For example, in the recent meeting he had with the members of Mashhad’s city council, he told them not to allow the building of shopping centres in which foreign goods are sold.

Alamolhoda is also known for his fanatical views. Some of them are as follows: he has banned concerts in Mashhad, saying 'if anyone wants to go to a concert, they can go to other cities'. Alamolhoda has also expressed his opposition to more freedoms for women, including cycling. He says that 'if men see women cycling, they will feel sexually aroused'. He has also voiced concern that Iranian women follow Western models and not Islamic figures. Once, he even mentioned Sophia Loren. Alamolhoda believes that anything promoting Western values must be banned. He even once said that 'English is the language of ignorance and deceit'. Alamolhoda strongly supports the idea of gender segregation in Iranian universities. He has also called on his followers to continue fighting against the individuals who do not take the compulsory hijab seriously enough.

All of the above-mentioned views, along with many others, are against the values and practices of the secular Mashhad. They impose tight constraints on the social life of the individuals belonging to the second Mashhad and, as a result, marginalise them. The first Mashhad, with its totalitarian characteristics, has expanded more dramatically since Alamolhoda was named as the leader's envoy in the province. It could not go beyond the borders of the Razavi Khorasan Province, however, due to Alamolhoda's provincial authority. But today, his son-in-law, another ayatollah from Mashhad, is the new president of Iran.

The humiliating defeat of the reformists in the election, and their possible assimilation into the establishment, makes it much easier for the hardliners to eliminate the rubble of the civil society and create their ideal Iran. It seems that this Iran would be very much like the totalitarian Mashhad that I have tried to describe. Establishing an 'authoritarian state', as Raisi said during one of the presidential debates, seems not to be a difficult job since his administration favours co-existence with a like-minded parliament and judiciary.

Despite the fact that this article paints a bleak future for Iran under Ebrahim Raisi, I would like to end my words by offering a hopeful view with the help of a quote from French philosopher, Michel Foucault: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.'

About the Author: Mehdi Nourian is a cultural studies researcher based in Tehran. He is currently working on Shi'a contentions in post-revolutionary Iran.

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Suite 5, 202 Hampden Road, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 6389 0211
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au