

# Saeed Jalili: Former Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council

June 2024



UNITED  
AGAINST  
NUCLEAR  
**IRAN**

UNITED  
AGAINST  
NUCLEAR  
**IRAN**

**Table of Contents**

**Saeed Jalili** ..... *Error! Bookmark not defined.*

**A “Living Martyr”** ..... **3**

**Influence within the Ahmadinejad Administration**..... **4**

**Khamenei’s Political Enforcer** ..... **4**

**Conclusion** ..... **6**

## Saeed Jalili

Through his [close relationship](#) with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Saeed Jalili has proven an influential figure within the politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly as a proponent of the regime's aggressive foreign policy and nuclear program. He built his reputation as a zealous ideologue on the world stage when he was appointed as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's nuclear negotiator. Over the course of his career, he has adopted the role of hardline ideological [enforcer](#) for Khamenei's office, applying [pressure](#) to the administration of Hassan Rouhani when it was seen as falling out of line with the Supreme Leader's directives. Through his extremely ideological posturing, Jalili has also been able to cultivate a significant support base amongst the small but radical social constituency of the Islamic Republic, not least among younger generations of the Basij paramilitary force and so-called *hezbollahi* youth. Though he has maintained a relatively behind-the-scenes profile in recent years, Jalili has remained politically involved through his connections and the ascension of his [protégés](#) to higher office. By [declaring](#) his intention to run for president on May 30, 2024 to succeed Ebrahim Raisi following his unexpected death, he offers Khamenei a loyal choice and the opportunity to [signal](#) an even more antagonistic turn in the regime's foreign policy.

## A "Living Martyr"

The genesis of Jalili's hardline Islamist worldview came through his service with the [Basij](#) in the Iran-Iraq War. In 1986, when he was just 21 years old, he lost the lower portion of his right leg in a [combat injury](#). This earned him the distinction of being a "living martyr," and greatly influenced his political views. The [combination](#) of sustaining this injury, blaming the United States and Europe for supporting Iraq, and undergoing the Basij's extensive program of [indoctrination](#) all established a deep belief in the ideological framework of the Islamic Revolution. Such was the experience for many other members of the Basij during the conflict, forming a cohort which [rose to political prominence](#) in the mid-2000s through the election of Ahmadinejad.

After the war, Jalili joined the [Inspections Office](#) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, rising to head inspector. During the first term of Mohammad Khatami's presidential administration beginning in 1997, he was [appointed](#) deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's American Department. Beyond these middling bureaucratic positions, Jalili's career was advanced during this period by his academic activities. Throughout his time at the Foreign Ministry, Jalili was [lecturing and conducting doctoral research](#) in political science at Imam Sadegh University, which he completed in 2002.

Imam Sadegh University is not a typical academic institution. Rather, it is an exclusive, [cult-like organization](#) designed to foster a cohort of fanatical technocrats referred to as *Imam Sadeghis*. The university, which is [de facto](#) under the authority of the Office of Supreme Leader, aims to

# UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

indoctrinate the next generation of bureaucrats in the Islamic Republic, with all of its students being required to undertake [ideological training](#) that mimics that of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). A prominent political cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi-Kani, was dean of the University from its founding in the 1980s until his death in 2014, in addition to serving as chairman of the Assembly of Experts. Jalili's involvement with the university honed his [hardline political perspectives](#) to be in line with those of the supreme leader, and established connections with like-minded figures. Additionally, his doctoral thesis and subsequent academic writing while at the university established the [foundation](#) of his belligerent foreign policy perspectives.

## Influence within the Ahmadinejad Administration

These experiences primed Jalili for higher levels of power, particularly in service to the supreme leader. In 2000, Khamenei [appointed](#) him as director of research within his office. There, Jalili established a [relationship](#) with the supreme leader's son, Mojtaba, who [wields](#) immense influence within both his father's office and in directing the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These ties formed the basis of the next phase in Jalili's career, as Khamenei's mouthpiece within the regime's foreign policy bureaucracy.

In 2005, Ahmadinejad [appointed](#) Jalili as deputy foreign minister. In this role, he [worked](#) closely with both the president and Ali Larijani, who was then serving as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). According to observers, Jalili [shadowed](#) Larijani to ensure he followed Ahmadinejad's directives, due to their longstanding mutual mistrust and personal [disagreements](#). When Larijani was ultimately pushed out of the SNSC in 2007, Jalili was appointed to replace him.

As head of the SNSC, Jalili worked to ensure that policymaking aligned with Khamenei's interests, essentially serving as the supreme leader's "[mouthpiece](#)." Aside from monitoring ideologically insufficient administrators, this role required that Jalili build a [relationship](#) with the Islamic Republic's proxies. As such, Jalili [visited](#) the leadership of Hezbollah, [met](#) with Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, and [hosted](#) senior Hamas officials.

In his capacity as nuclear negotiator, Jalili took a [firm stance](#) in support of the regime's nuclear program, continuously [asserting](#) that such activities were its sovereign right. This caused a breakdown in negotiations which led the United Nations Security Council to [impose sanctions](#) during his tenure. Despite continuously asserting the "[peaceful](#)" nature of the nuclear program, Jalili and the other negotiators [refused](#) to take the steps necessary to verify the claim or otherwise cooperate with UN agencies. Additionally, Jalili [demanded](#) absurd and deeply ideologically rooted [concessions](#) from his Western counterparts, including regulations on women's dress and the right to deliver Islamic hadiths during the nuclear negotiations.

# UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

Though he failed to secure sanctions relief, this petulant approach gave Jalili [political credibility](#) within the regime's hardline faction, and created the opportunity to elevate other like-minded Imam Sadeghis like [Ali Baqeri-Kani](#), who Jalili mentored as his deputy.

## Khamenei's Political Enforcer

The experience of working within the Ahmadinejad administration provided Jalili with a heightened profile, which caused some observers to perceive him as a [frontrunner](#) in the 2013 presidential elections and [anticipate](#) he would enjoy Khamenei's support. However, Jalili was widely [attacked](#) for his poor track record in nuclear negotiations, and he failed to emerge as the primary [hardline](#) candidate. Ultimately, Jalili finished the election in a distant [third place](#). However, Khamenei demonstrated sympathy for Jalili and indicated that he may enjoy his support in future elections, claiming that his voters formed the "[base](#)" of the Islamic Republic.

Shortly after the election, Khamenei [elevated](#) Jalili to the Expediency Council, providing a means for him to remain politically relevant. He also maintained a hand in the development of the regime's foreign policy, acting as Khamenei's [personal representative](#) on the SNSC. This enabled Jalili to assist in [expanding](#) the influence of Khamenei's office and the IRGC over managing foreign relations, at the expense of Rouhani's administration. Furthermore, Jalili formed a "[shadow government](#)," along with other [hardliners](#) with connections to Khamenei and the IRGC such as Raisi.

In leadup to the 2017 presidential election, it was widely [speculated](#) in Iran that Jalili could once again mount a campaign. Nevertheless, he declined to be a candidate, citing the need for the hardline faction to consolidate behind [Raisi](#). With Raisi's defeat, however, Jalili saw his influence expand at Khamenei's behest.

During Rouhani's second term, the [influence](#) of the "shadow government" expanded, especially as [tensions](#) mounted between the president and Khamenei. Under the guise of "[assisting](#)" Rouhani's administration, the "shadow government" designed and lobbied for hardline policies, leveraged personal networks to wield influence, and advanced Khamenei's backchannel diplomacy. Though Jalili [claimed](#) to be modelling his efforts on the activities of opposition parties within other parliamentary systems, Jalili's relationship with the supreme leader allowed him to [undermine](#) Rouhani's authority as president. Specifically, this meant [opposing](#) any new nuclear negotiations with the West, in line with Khamenei's position.

Through the end of Rouhani's second term, Jalili consolidated his position as one of Khamenei's most hardline enforcers demonstrated by fierce ideological loyalty. Against this backdrop, he [mounted](#) another bid for the presidency the 2021 election, perhaps anticipating Khamenei's support. However, he and other hardline candidates [dropped out](#) to support Raisi prior to the vote, as Khamenei and the IRGC threw their weight behind his candidacy.

# UNITED AGAINST NUCLEAR IRAN

After Raisi's victory thanks to the regime's [unprecedented electoral engineering](#), Jalili was poised to act as a significant force within the new administration. Many of the hardline politicians associated with his "shadow government" were given key [appointments](#) by the new president, and key [policies](#) that he drafted were implemented – including many underlying the regime's "[resistance economy](#)." Some of his earlier associates, like Baqeri-Kani, were given significant portfolios.

Behind the scenes, Jalili [maintained](#) elements of his "shadow government," in order to pressure the administration if necessary. At certain points, he did [host](#) key officials for wide-ranging discussions. He also attempted to draw distinctions with Raisi – such as by [calling](#) for programs to expand employment. Nevertheless, he remained a staunch ally of the president – posturing in this way to remain politically relevant and keep the door open to future political ambition.

In 2024, Raisi's unexpected death provided Jalili with the opportunity to finally secure the presidency with Khamenei's support. He applied for candidacy on the first day of registration, and immediately began to [jockey](#) for the hardline mantle left by the former president. As part of his campaign messaging, Jalili has once again leaned on his status as a "living martyr," [referencing](#) the "Sacred Defense" and [chanting](#) "no compromise" and "no surrender" with his supporters.

Jalili is certainly one of the main frontrunners for the presidency. He has all the characteristics to satisfy Khamenei, having consistently demonstrated blind obedience to the supreme leader even when suffering personal losses. In the eyes of Khamenei, Jalili is the archetype *velayat madar* (in Farsi): an individual who completely surrenders to the absolute will of the supreme leader and is prepared to be sacrificed in this path. His lack of personality and charisma will also serve to his advantage as it lessens the chance of any future challenge to the supreme leader's authority. Beyond his personality traits, Jalili is deeply embedded within the Office of Supreme Leader and has a very close relationship with the IRGC, not least among the younger generations of the Guard and the Basij paramilitary force. That being said, Jalili is unpopular in some [circles due to his ideological extremism](#), particularly due to his continued opposition to negotiations and [dismissal](#) of sanctions relief as a policy priority.

## Conclusion

After a long career marked by hardline loyalty, instilled by indoctrination in the Basij and Imam Sadegh University, Jalili could prove to be Khamenei's best choice as he seeks to "[purify](#)" the regime as part of his "Second Phase of the Islamic Revolution" manifesto. Given Jalili's track record, his [relationship](#) with Mojtaba Khamenei, and the [presence](#) of IRGC personnel among his campaign organizers, the former hardline nuclear negotiator should certainly be considered as a main frontrunner for the presidency. In any case, Jalili certainly has the personal traits,

UNITED  
AGAINST  
NUCLEAR  
**IRAN**

bureaucratic experience, and blind ideological commitment to satisfy Khamenei's demands.