

Ali Akbar Velayati: Foreign Policy Advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader

August 2023



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IRAN

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Ali Akbar Velayati

Ali Akbar Velayati has held prominent leadership posts in the Islamic Republic since its inception. Rising from a member of parliament to foreign minister and later foreign policy advisor to Iran’s supreme leader, Velayati’s ascent can be attributed to his patron [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#). Some observers view him as Tehran’s true foreign minister without the title.

Early Years

Velayati was [born](#) on June 25, 1945 in Tehran. He received his medical degree from the University of Tehran in 1971, specializing in pediatrics. Prior to the Islamic Revolution, he furthered his education with a [fellowship](#) at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in 1976. Velayati was on the [radar](#) of the Shah’s security services, namely SAVAK, given his activities against the Pahlavi monarchy and was interrogated for promoting protests against the Shah. In 1961, he [joined](#) the National Front, a secular and democratic party. However, he later recounted that in 1963, “I separated from the National Front and began to involve myself with religious scholars and activists.” While in the United States, he [was](#) a member of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Muslim Students Association.

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Velayati quickly rose through the ranks as part of a young technocratic cohort committed to the ideals of the first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Utilizing his medical background, Velayati [began](#) his career in the Iranian establishment as deputy health minister. He also served in Iran’s parliament, representing Tehran from 1980-1981.

During these years, the Islamic Republic witnessed significant turmoil in its leadership, marked by a series of bombings and political transitions. Between 1979 and 1981, a number of individuals, including Mehdi Bazargan, Mohammad-Ali Rajai, Mohammad-Javad Bahonar, and Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi Khani, held the position of prime minister. Similarly, Abolhassan Banisadr and Mohammad-Ali Rajai served as president from 1980 to 1981. It was only after Rajai’s assassination that Ali Khamenei took the post in 1981, a position he held until 1989. Khamenei had [favored](#) naming Velayati as prime minister in 1981, but that nomination faced parliamentary opposition, leading to the appointment of Mir-Hossein Mousavi instead. This led to conflicts between Khamenei and Mousavi.

Foreign Minister

Velayati eventually found his place as foreign minister, a role he assumed in 1981. He replaced Mousavi, who held the post before he became prime minister.

Velayati helmed the foreign ministry during the harrowing years of the Iran-Iraq War. He represented Iran on the world stage, [proclaiming](#) that “the overthrow of Saddam Hussein never was a main condition for peace negotiations with Iraq.” During those years, except in 1987, when Khamenei himself visited New York for the opening of the U.N. General Assembly, Velayati occupied the role of the Islamic Republic’s face to the world. In 1982, Velayati [told](#) the U.N. General Assembly, “four years ago, there was a revolution in Iran. This revolution was based on Islamic principles. The Islamic Revolution has made us strong enough to stand against oppression and help those who have suffered, especially in the developing countries, and at the same time not to rely on foreign powers. One of the most important mottos of the Islamic Republic is ‘neither East nor West.’ With reliance on this motto, we have been able to free ourselves from American dominance. The battle with American imperialism and Zionism is a difficult and long one.”

As a declassified U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [report](#) from 1985 noted, Velayati was considered a pragmatist then. He argued that the ‘neither East nor West’ motto of Iran’s foreign policy “was Iran’s ability to maintain a balance between East and West to avoid reliance on either bloc while pursuing relations with both to its own advantage.” In this regard, the CIA noted that he spearheaded a campaign to increase the Islamic Republic’s diplomatic representation internationally to build up trade and investment. The report highlighted the result of these efforts: “In 1981, Iran’s foreign trade was estimated at \$22.7 billion, while in 1983 trade was estimated at \$37.7 billion.” Khomeini seemingly [endorsed](#) Velayati’s approach, and in a rebuke to more radical elements, he delivered a major speech in 1984 warning that “if isolated, it [the Islamic Republic] could not exist.”

Velayati was reconfirmed as foreign minister in 1984 after controversy erupted from these same radical elements who were opposed to his pragmatic approach and efforts to build diplomatic relations with other countries. At the time, however, Khamenei again continued to feud with Mousavi. Khamenei [favored](#) ousting him as prime minister and even complained to Khomeini, who rejected the request. Khamenei reportedly wrote to Khomeini, “If your Excellency is of the opinion that I must nominate Mr. Mousavi, then order me to. You are the leader and on Judgement Day you have the answer, but I cannot justify appointing somebody to the premiership whom I do not find prudent, unless he is supported by the Imam’s mandate.” Mousavi served a second term as prime minister beginning in 1985. Khamenei still [favored](#) installing Velayati in the post.

Velayati was at the [helm](#) when Iran agreed with Iraq to accept the U.N. Security Council’s Resolution 598 as the basis for ending the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. He traveled to New York to negotiate its implementation. Later, Velayati [recounted](#) that Resolution 598 was “remarkable” in

Iranian history as the Iranian negotiating team persuaded the United Nations to label Saddam Hussein as the aggressor and urge the return of Iraq's army to its borders.

After Khamenei became supreme leader in 1989, Velayati remained in his post as Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani assumed the presidency. Despite Velayati's reputation in the U.S. intelligence community as a pragmatist, he has been implicated in Iranian terror plots around the world while serving as foreign minister. He was a [part](#) of the Committee for Special Operations, which decided to assassinate Iranian Kurdish leaders at the Mykonos Greek restaurant in Berlin in 1992. Later, after the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina in Buenos Aires that killed 85 people, Velayati was [charged](#) in Argentina for homicide and was labeled an "ideological mastermind" behind the operation, which earned him a U.S. sanctions designation in 2019. Through the years, Argentina has [unsuccessfully](#) attempted to arrest Velayati as he traveled abroad—in Azerbaijan, Malaysia, Russia, and Singapore.

Foreign Policy Advisor to the Supreme Leader

Following Rafsanjani's presidency spanning from 1989 to 1997, Velayati resigned as foreign minister when reformist Mohammad Khatami assumed the presidency in 1997. Khatami aimed to assemble a new team and appointed Kamal Kharrazi as Velayati's successor. However, Khamenei quickly found a landing spot for Velayati—an arguably more influential post as the supreme leader's foreign policy advisor. Upon his appointment, Khamenei [said](#) Velayati had spent a "fruitful and proud period" as foreign minister and that he would assume this advisory position to "better exploit [his] wealth of experience."

Such a dynamic reflected Khamenei's desire to bureaucratize and professionalize the Office of the Supreme Leader. It quickly overpowered the presidency as the beating heart of Iranian foreign policy decision-making. With Velayati, the longest-serving foreign minister in the history of the Islamic Republic, comfortably ensconced in Khamenei's office, this positioned him to exert great influence over strategy. Reuters [described](#) him as the Islamic Republic's "real foreign minister" behind the scenes.

Velayati was able to pair his service as Khamenei's foreign policy advisor with a series of other positions, including as [secretary-general](#) of the [Ahlulbayt World Assembly](#) from 1999-2002, which is an internationally active Iranian NGO that functions as the umbrella over a network of Iranian-backed religious, cultural, and educational institutions tasked with disseminating Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Islamist ideology around the world. Additionally, Velayati has served as a member of the [Expediency Council](#), which arbitrates disputes between parliament and the Guardian Council; he served as the head of the Expediency Council's internal think tank, the Center for Strategic Research; was named chairman of the board of trustees of Islamic Azad University, a large network of universities in Iran; and has continued to practice medicine as head of Tehran's Masih Daneshvari Hospital. In 2005, Velayati [indicated](#) he would run for the presidency but later dropped out. In [2013](#), Velayati ran another unsuccessful campaign for president.

Velayati routinely opines in Iranian media on current affairs and occasionally speaks with foreign counterparts on core priorities of the Islamic Republic. Until recently, he also regularly accompanied Iran's presidents to the ceremonial airport send-off ahead of their foreign trips. He is a regular feature at meetings between Iran's supreme leader and visiting foreign dignitaries. He additionally traveled representing the supreme leader to Russia and Syria, but as noted in the previous section, Velayati has been careful given Argentina's warrant for his arrest.

As Khamenei's advisor on foreign affairs, he played an instrumental role in backchannel diplomacy with the United States. CIA Director Bill Burns, a former U.S. diplomat, [recounted](#) in his memoir about participating in a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Russia's foreign minister where they proposed opening a U.S. Interests Section in Tehran. Russia's foreign minister promised to submit the proposal to Velayati. Nevertheless, it went nowhere. Velayati also made a cameo appearance during the backchannel nuclear negotiations with the United States in 2011-2012. As later [recounted](#) by one of Velayati's successors, Ali Akbar Salehi, about a letter from the sultan of Oman, "After this letter was received, I got in touch with the office of the supreme leader, and I told Mr. [Asghar Mir] Hejazi that such a letter exists, and how I should deliver it. Mr. Hejazi said he will let me know. He later got in touch and said that we should give the letter to Mr. [Ali Akbar] Velayati. I gave the letter to Mr. Velayati and he delivered it to the supreme leader."

Velayati emerged as a defender of the Rouhani administration's direct diplomacy with the United States. In 2014 during the negotiations which led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) amid criticism from hardline elements of the regime, Velayati [remarked](#), "We are sure that Mr. Zarif and the nuclear team will not cross the [country's] red lines." However, as [Foreign Policy](#) magazine noted, Velayati's position hardened soon after the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. He [said](#), "the other problem of the JCPOA was the lack of a Farsi version [of the agreement], which makes one feel belittled. Even the Golestan and Turkmenchay treaties with that humiliating [content] had a Farsi version." He went on to [complain](#) about the Rouhani administration's approach, "on the issue of the JCPOA, they tied [supplying] people's water and bread to the JCPOA and closed down the country...They injected disappointment and despair into society and told them that we should negotiate to solve the problems." Velayati later gave an interview posted on the Office of the Supreme Leader's website, outlining preconditions for a U.S. return to the JCPOA under the Biden administration. He called for a written guarantee of a U.S. commitment not to withdraw from the JCPOA that would bind future American presidencies, something the Biden administration could not deliver on. Velayati also [complained](#) about the snapback sanctions mechanism, which he claimed the supreme leader did not accept and was done against his will.

Velayati seems to have straddled a fine line in his career between advocating for engagement with the United States to solve problems and not becoming overly dependent on interaction with Western countries. This is consistent with the 'neither East nor West' motto. After the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, Velayati sought to rebalance the equation of Iran's diplomatic relations, and has [reportedly](#) favored enhancing ties with Russia. This unsurprisingly tracks with

Khamenei's trajectory of tacit endorsement of the the nuclear talks from 2013-2015 followed by deemphasis of their importance from 2021-2023.

Velayati's Family and Future Prospects

Velayati's [first wife](#), Shirin Khoshnevisan, died after medical surgery in 2005. In 2008 he married Leila Enayat, the sister-in-law of Sadegh Mahsouli, who served in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's cabinet. Velayati has been [implicated](#) in a controversy over living in a home that was confiscated from its previous owners during the Pahlavi monarchy. He was one of several senior officials in the Islamic Republic that lacked the title deeds to the property.

He is 78 years old, which is six years younger than Iran's supreme leader, who is 84. Velayati represents an aging cohort in the inner sanctum of power in the Islamic Republic. Thus, his future opportunities for advancement remain limited. He will likely continue to serve as foreign policy advisor to Khamenei for the foreseeable future, at least until the supreme leader dies. If Velayati becomes unable to continue in the post for any health reasons, there are other former foreign ministers who can fill the void, like Kamal Kharrazi, Ali Akbar Salehi, or Javad Zarif, but they lack Velayati's history with and closeness to Khamenei.