

# Eye On Iran's Presidential Election

June 2021

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## Overview

On June 18, 2021, Iran will hold its 13<sup>th</sup> presidential election since the 1979 establishment of the Islamic Republic, with the possibility of a runoff if no candidate secures 50% of the initial vote. In Iran’s political system, however, final decision-making on critical matters of state rests with the [supreme leader](#), who has the constitutional authority to approve or disapprove votes cast for a president. The supreme leader sets the tone and direction of domestic and foreign policy, and wields formal and informal means to undermine and stymie the agenda of presidents.

For decades, the choice facing Iranians in presidential elections has been subjected to the whim of the supreme leader. All candidates for president must pass vetting by the Guardian Council, a 12-member deliberative body constituted by six clerics directly selected by the supreme leader, and six lawyers proposed by the judicial branch chief—who himself is also selected by the supreme leader—and approved by the parliament. The council has certain explicit criteria for who may stand for election, such as loyalty to the supreme leader and the ruling regime, as well as other non-transparent criteria that give the council, and thus the supreme leader, the authority to engineer the election field as they see fit.

The Islamic Republic does not have organized political parties, though the body politic has generally been divided among two factions, each of which has its own sub-factions. So-called “moderates” or “Reformists” have traditionally advocated for reformation within the Islamic Republic to ensure its survival. Such changes include expanding political and social freedom, building closer economic ties with the West, and reducing tensions with the United States. In contrast, the “Principlist” or “hardline” camp are committed<sup>2</sup> to the principles of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and abhor compromise or engagement with the United

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States. The latter have called for stronger ties with Russia and China, and conditional engagement with Europe.

Generally, the Reformist presidential candidates have acknowledged they have had difficulty in fulfilling previous campaign promises but argue that voting for them would be necessary to prevent Iran from becoming more isolated internationally, as with North Korea. Principlist candidates have also modified their campaign messaging to appeal to more voters, such as by opposing internet filtering, promising morality police focused on keeping officials accountable, and advocating for the privacy of people in their own domains. However, candidates from both camps tend to make lofty promises they are later unable or unwilling to fulfill.

The current election cycle shares strong similarities with the 2005 election that was followed by the election of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, with notable differences. One of the main similarities is electorate apathy toward Reformists because of their inability or unwillingness to fulfill campaign promises. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his allies successfully stymied the agendas of the Reformist Khatami (1997-2005) and Reformist-backed Rouhani administrations. Ahmadinejad came to power with the full backing of the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) and the Supreme Leader, but his relationship with those centers of power broke in his second term. However, this cycle, popular apathy toward Reformists, and toward the Islamic Republic writ large, is stronger than in 2005. Far fewer Iranians believe that meaningful reform is even possible after four complete terms totaling 16 years with a Reformist or Reformist-backed president since 1997 failed to deliver promises like increasing political and social freedoms, or economic opportunity. This year's election also comes on the backdrop of two mass protests since the last election in 2017; the November 2019 protests were especially bloody, when the Islamic Republic shut down the internet and killed hundreds. It is worth noting that several prominent Reformist figures—including the movement's spiritual leader, former President Mohammad Khatami—voiced their support for the Islamic Republic against the protests. Khatami [praised](#) Khamenei's position with regards to the protests while warning that reforms must be permitted to take hold to prevent those who wish to overthrow the regime from gaining traction.

While the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign has squeezed the Iranian economy, many in the electorate attribute the majority of economic problems to the Islamic Republic's policies, which many feel has led to tensions with world powers, and to mismanagement. It is worth noting that Principlist candidates in this election are trying to blame the majority of issues and mismanagement on the Rouhani administration. The Principlist candidates are calling for Iran to boost domestic production and implement a "resistance economy" that would be able to withstand external pressure from the U.S. and EU.

Another important backdrop is the question of [succession to the supreme leadership](#). Khamenei is 82 years old, and there is the possibility that the next president, who could be in power for 4–8 years, can very well oversee the succession. The process has not followed the Islamic Republic's own constitutional requirements, and the prevailing faction will probably amend the constitution to reflect the balance of power. While there is speculation about Raisi succeeding Khamenei, the Supreme Leader has not made his decision. What is crucial for the top factions is having a president who will "go with the program." A president could potentially play spoiler in succession, using his pulpit to call for street protests for or against any designated successor.

The ideological diversity of candidates disqualified by the Guardian Council shows how the circles of power

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at the top have become smaller. Only seven out of 600 official registrants were allowed to run. In addition to Reformists, former Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, Khamenei's confidant for decades who has grown closer to centrists and Reformists in recent years, was also disqualified. So was [Brigadier General Saeed Mohammad](#), who was the chief of the IRGC engineering arm [Khatam ol-Anbiya Construction Base](#) until March, when he formally declared his run for office.

The Guardian Council's disqualifications have further depressed enthusiasm. Even by state media standards, voter turnout is [anticipated](#) to be the lowest ever. There is a widespread feeling that the field has been stacked in the favor of candidate and Judiciary branch chief Ebrahim Raisi.

Beyond implications for succession, this year's election comes as Iran and the West are engaged in talks to restore the [Iran nuclear deal](#). A Raisi or another "hardliner" presidency could mean a harsher tone in the talks, but ultimately the Supreme Leader has signed off on the negotiations, and he and his close advisers have made it clear that the goal of the talks is to lift sanctions. A Reformist-backed president would essentially be a continuation of the Rouhani administration.

This resource profiles front-runner Ebrahim Raisi, a potential first-tier candidate, and the other five second-tier figures vying for Iran's presidency.

## First Tier

### **Ebrahim Raisi**

Ebrahim Raisi has steadily risen through the ranks of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In recent years, he has been increasingly referred to with the high cleric rank of "Ayatollah." Spending most of his career in the judiciary, three factors can explain Raisi's ascendance: promotion by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, an influential family network, and a knack for leveraging state positions to feed his ambition. Raisi has spent his career developing his image as an anti-corruption crusader—a **selective crusade that does not target his close allies**. In recent years, Raisi has emerged as a leading candidate to succeed the 82-year old Khamenei, but the Supreme Leader has not decided. In the event that a Raisi presidency coincides with succession, Ebrahim Raisi is a figure that will not disrupt decisions made by hardline-dominated centers of power, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

## 2021 Presidential Candidacy

After much speculation, Raisi decided to run in the June 2021 presidential election. At 60 years old, conservative cleric Raisi is situated as the front runner for Principlists, or self-described revolutionaries, in the election. His [campaign slogan](#) is "popular government, strong Iran."

Raisi previously ran and lost in the 2017 presidential race, securing only 38.5% of the vote compared to 57% for incumbent President Hassan Rouhani in a race that had a turnout of 70%, according to official government figures.

[Voice of America](#) and Deutsche Welles Persian have [reported](#) that on the day that Raisi registered for the presidency, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Intelligence Organization and Judiciary agents

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warned a number of reporters in Iran not to write critical content about Raisi.

Raisi's candidacy, and the pains taken to clear the path for him, have fueled speculation that the presidency is intended as a stepping stone to his eventual succession as Supreme Leader. However, no one, except a select few in the system, knows who will be the Supreme Leader. Yet, as a figure of growing prominence, it is necessary to examine the totality of Raisi's career to ascertain his vision for the future of the Islamic Republic.

## Raisi's Early Years

[Born](#) on December 14, 1960, in Mashhad, Iran, Raisi's father [died](#) when he was five. He later entered the Qom Seminary, where he made an early impression. At the dawn of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Raisi [says](#) he was selected to be one of 70 students to take part in courses on Khomeinist governance. It was there that Raisi first met [Ali Khamenei](#), one of his teachers. At the time, Khamenei's career in the regime was just beginning, having been named by Iran's founding Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini to multiple posts, including deputy defense minister and Friday prayer leader of Tehran.

That connection helped jumpstart Raisi's tenure in Tehran's halls of power. He first [became](#) the prosecutor-general in Karaj at the age of 20. Media accounts at the time detail the harrowing use of executions in Karaj—with one [case](#) involving four women accused of prostitution and six men accused of possession of illegal drugs being executed by firing squads. In other cases, an anti-regime protester was [executed](#), as were [members](#) of the Baha'i faith.

Raisi then became prosecutor-general of Hamedan. It was during this period—in [1983](#)—that Raisi married Jamileh Alamolhoda, the daughter of conservative Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda. When his daughter met Raisi, Alamolhoda was already a fixture inside the regime, having served as the [head](#) of a revolutionary *komiteh* (Islamic Revolution Committees, which were police bodies that enforced public morality laws and later merged into the Law Enforcement Forces)."

in Tehran and as a senior official at Imam Sadiq University. Alamolhoda would eventually [rise](#) to become the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad in 2005 and later the supreme leader's representative to Razavi Khorasan Province in 2016. He would also become a mentor to rising personalities in Tehran, including Saeed Jalili, for whom Alamolhoda served as a dissertation [advisor](#) at Imam Sadiq University. Thus, Raisi's family connection to Alamolhoda—especially given his own father's death at a young age—would be an instrumental anchor in promoting his career.

In 1985, Raisi was transferred to Tehran and appointed deputy prosecutor-general. The capital city of Tehran was a plum assignment for Raisi, who was still in his 20s. Raisi served as deputy to two chief prosecutors-general—Ali Razini and Morteza Eshraghi—from 1985 to 1989. He appears to have modeled parts of his career after Razini and Eshraghi. Razini later [served](#) as chief judge of the Special Court for Clergy, where Raisi would later become prosecutor-general. While serving under Eshraghi during his tenure as prosecutor-general of Tehran, Raisi received an infamous—and in regime terms, invaluable—opportunity in 1988, working with him as a member of a “death commission” established after the end of the Iran-Iraq War to review the cases of political prisoners, which resulted in the execution of thousands of people. There is evidence Raisi was ostensibly treated as Eshraghi's equal on the commission—specifically, a [letter](#) written by then-Deputy Supreme Leader Hossein Ali Montazeri in 1988 was addressed, in part, to both Eshraghi and Raisi. Such correspondence from someone of Montazeri's rank signaled Raisi's

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heightened profile in Tehran's halls of power. In the letter, Montazeri blasted the Tehran death commission, [saying](#), “[w]e are upset by the crimes of monafeqin in the west [of the country] and we are taking this out on captives and former prisoners. However, executing them when they have not engaged in any new activity means undermining all our judges and past judgments. On what basis do you execute someone whom you have already sentenced to a punishment lesser than the death penalty?”

Raisi's importance on the commission was once again confirmed in an audio recording of a meeting he [participated](#) in with Montazeri in 1988. Montazeri is heard [saying](#), “[i]n my view, the biggest crime in the Islamic Republic, for which the history will condemn us, has been committed at your hands, and they'll write your names as criminals in the history.” But it was Montazeri, rather than Raisi, who was condemned and sidelined, later being [removed](#) from his post as deputy supreme leader, while Raisi was promoted to chief prosecutor-general of Tehran in 1989. Raisi's promotion incidentally coincided with Ali Khamenei's ascension to the supreme leadership and his installation of a new chief justice—Mohammad Yazdi. Thus Raisi was likely seen as sufficiently loyal to Khamenei as the new supreme leader and his associates began to wield authority over Iran's judiciary.

During Raisi's tenure as chief prosecutor, he continued to be one of the Islamic Republic's chief enablers in purging detractors of the state. For example, one Human Rights Watch report [indicated](#) that in 1990 Tehran's Islamic revolutionary prosecutor “ordered the arrest of more than 30 signatories of an open letter to President Rafsanjani,” which criticized his policies, particularly the ban of the Iran Freedom Movement, led by former Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan. Tehran's revolutionary prosecutor also [ordered](#) the dissolution of the Association for the Defense of Freedom and Sovereignty of the Iranian Nation that same month. In August 1993, the Islamic revolutionary courts [ordered](#) the arrest of the editor-in-chief of the *Salam* newspaper after its criticism of government policy. Mehdi Nassiri, the editor-in-chief of *Kayhan*, was similarly [detained](#) on slander charges filed against him by Iran's then Chief Justice Mohammad Yazdi. Thus, Raisi was on the frontlines of the battle for control over Iran's political space.

## National Platform

Raisi concluded his tenure as chief prosecutor-general of Tehran in 1994. In [1995](#), soon after he left the post, Iran decided not to fill the office of prosecutors-general, instead relying on judges to act as both prosecutor and judge. Such an arrangement lasted around eight years. But Raisi was nonetheless rewarded for his service, being promoted as head of the General Inspection Office of Iran (GIO), a post in which he served for ten years. This was the first position that Raisi occupied with nationwide reach—before he was a prosecutor at the local level, with Tehran being his most prestigious assignment to date. The job at GIO would therefore offer him more management experience and exposure. Article 174 of Iran's Constitution stipulates its authority in keeping with the judiciary's role to “supervise the proper conducting of affairs and the correct implementation of laws by the administrative organs of the government.” That Raisi was elevated to this role during the tenure of then-Chief Justice Mohammad Yazdi is an example of Yazdi's promotion of his career—with the young cleric receiving now two important positions under Yazdi's tenure.

Despite the national platform the role afforded its occupants, the position had not been a stepping stone to more powerful positions in the Islamic Republic. Raisi's predecessor, Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad, served in the job for 13 years—from 1981 to 1994—spanning almost the entirety of Khomeini's supreme leadership and the early part of Khamenei's tenure. But Mohaghegh Damad wasn't rewarded with a more powerful position in 1994. This could partly be explained by Mohaghegh Damad being trusted more by

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Khomeini than by Khamenei, as he rose through the ranks during the former and had his career cut short by the latter. Thus, Raisi was entering office risking the same fate as Mohaghegh Damad. The fact that his former role as chief prosecutor-general of Tehran was left unfilled by the regime for years after his tenure may have added to the fear of the GIO being a dead end for Raisi.

But he quickly established himself as a player in Tehran's halls of power during his tenure, laying the groundwork for his brand as an anti-corruption crusader—at one point saying most of the cases on his [docket](#) dealt with corruption and that he would be prepared to confront leading clerics accused of such illicit activity. Early in his tenure, he [bragged](#) to provincial judges in Hormozgan that a commission had been established at the judiciary to help inspire confidence in its operations. Raisi played a role in an [investigation](#) of corruption in institutions directly controlled by the supreme leader, boasting that a final report had been submitted to Khamenei himself. He also [showcased](#) efforts by the GIO to thwart profiteering from government grants and loans, and even began an investigation into the division of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in charge of book censorship. Raisi also [spearheaded](#) cases of embezzlement of 100 and 120 billion rials from the Housing and Urban Development departments of Khuzestan and Qazvin provinces, respectively, and [chastised](#) state managers who flew to Kish Island, arguing the trip was too extravagant. Likewise, he exposed how private cooperatives used public assets—a method by which Iranian officials engage in corrupt activity.

Such exposure to Iran's sprawling bureaucracy—from the judiciary to the executive branch—was likely valuable for Raisi, enabling him to build a brand in tackling corruption, as well as nurturing relationships. Iranian news outlets indicate Raisi won [praise](#) at one point from Reformist and then-President Mohammad Khatami for his “accurate reports” setting an “exemplary model for his ministers.” Raisi served as the head of GIO until 2004—during the tenures of both Chief Justices Yazdi and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi.

In 2004, he would ascend to the office of first deputy chief justice. It was again indicative of the confidence that Khamenei and Chief Justice Shahroudi had in his loyalty. Raisi replaced Mohammad-Hadi Marvi, who had served as first deputy chief justice since 1999. But Raisi soon found himself facing a similar dynamic to when he first started as the head of the GIO. His predecessors at the GIO—Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad—and as first deputy chief justice—Mohammad-Hadi Marvi—had both vanished into relative obscurity after their roles as senior judiciary officials. Thus there was no guarantee of an automatic promotion as he began his new role. But Raisi's timing was fortuitous, as he would have direct working relationships with Chief Justice Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi and later Sadegh Larijani, who, at various points, were both viewed as potential successors to Khamenei.

Raisi quickly raised his profile as deputy chief justice—becoming associated not only with anti-corruption cases but also with pressing security and social matters of the time. In 2008, he [accused](#) the United States and the United Kingdom of supporting the Sunni militant group Jundallah “with arms and information,” claiming Iran had documents proving the assistance. Such a declaration was important as Jundallah would later sponsor a suicide bombing in Iran for the first time, killing four and wounding 12 in Saravan. Raisi played a visible role in the crackdown on the unrest following the disputed June 2009 reelection of then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, [announcing](#) hangings of protesters. Indeed, Raisi was careful to follow Khamenei's edicts as deputy chief justice, [proclaiming](#) that because the supreme leader had said that questioning the validity of the 2009 presidential election was a “great crime,” “those who have proposed, the elections were fraudulent and created doubt in the public's mind have undoubtedly committed a grave

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crime and naturally will have to answer for the crime they have committed.” He also [dubbed](#) the incident with inmates detained after the 2009 presidential election unrest dying at Kahrizak Prison a “peripheral issue,” and made a point of publicizing how the children of former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani would be tried.

In 2011, he dismissed [allegations](#) of gang rapes, claiming that in Iran, “there is more safety for women than in Western society.” As sanctions suffocated Iran’s economy, Raisi [announced](#) in 2012 the indictment of 18 current and former U.S. officials for “criminal acts” against Iran. All of these announcements are indicative of Raisi’s careful attention to his image—capitalizing on waste, fraud, and abuse inside Iran’s government while at the same time meting out harsh punishments in security cases and grabbing headlines with high-profile indictments.

Raisi and his family were also rewarded after he became first deputy to Iran’s chief justice. In 2005, Iran’s supreme leader [named](#) his father-in-law, Ayatollah Alamolhoda, as the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad. This was a plum assignment, given Khamenei’s [birth](#) in Mashhad. Raisi himself became a [member](#) of the Assembly of Experts, which is constitutionally vested with the selection and supervision of the supreme leader, in 2006. Soon after, in 2007, capitalizing on the platform that Khamenei had given him as a Friday prayer leader, Alamolhoda became a [member](#) of the Assembly of Experts.

In 2012, Raisi became the recipient of additional positions which further boosted his stock in Tehran. That year, he was [named](#) the prosecutor-general of the Special Court for the Clergy—a position in which he remains to this day. [Alumni](#) of this post included powerful figures from the regime—including three onetime intelligence ministers: Ali Fallahian, Mohammad Reyshahri, and Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei.

Raisi lasted in the role of first deputy chief justice until 2014, and after became attorney general of Iran, another position in the judiciary. Once again, Raisi found himself in the same circle of clerics who had occupied positions of consequence both in the intelligence and judicial communities. In fact, both Mohammad Reyshahri and Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei were Raisi’s predecessors as attorney general in addition to prosecutor-general of the Special Court for the Clergy. Raisi came to the position having previously served as a provincial and municipal prosecutor. He had served on the national level at GIO and as a deputy chief justice. But the public had never before seen him as a national prosecutor. During his tenure, Raisi generated headlines by vowing to take legal action against Saudi Arabia for a stampede during the annual hajj. He [called](#) it a crime and accused Saudi Arabia of blocking a road used by pilgrims for the use of a royal motorcade.

During his time as attorney general, Raisi also began speaking at symbolically important events for the regime, thus boosting his visibility. For instance, in 2015, he [spoke](#) on Aban 13, which marks the anniversary of the seizure of the U.S. embassy in 1979, where marchers travel from the University of Tehran to the site of the former U.S. embassy. In 2016, he gave a [speech](#) during the Fajr ceremonies, which mark the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Raisi was scheduled as the first speaker that year at Khomeini’s mausoleum. Again, this was an important event for Raisi as he ascended the ladder of power.

## The Politicization of a Religious Platform

On March 8, 2016, Iran’s supreme leader appointed Raisi as the new head of Astan-e Quds Razavi in Mashhad. In a statement, Khamenei [referred](#) to him as a “trustworthy person with high-profile experience.” Astan-e Quds Razavi is Iran’s wealthiest foundation and oversees the Imam Reza Shrine,

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which is one of the holiest sites in Shiite Islam. According to some [estimates](#), Astan-e Quds Razavi's assets total billions of dollars. Raisi's elevation to the post was historic by any measure. He [succeeded](#) Abbas Vaez-Tabasi, who had held the position since Khomeini appointed him in 1979 until the day he died. The position provided Raisi with both a religious and financial platform from which to further promote his brand. Raisi's family was also rewarded at the same time, with the supreme leader [naming](#) Raisi's father-in-law, Ayatollah Alamolhoda, as Khamenei's new representative to the province of Khorasan Razavi. That put Raisi's family in firm control of one of Iran's most important cities.

Nevertheless, Raisi found himself once again in a position where his predecessor wasn't necessarily upwardly mobile—with Vaez-Tabasi lasting in the role for decades. But Raisi soon found a way to capitalize on his new role. Only [months](#) after his appointment, Iranian media began referring to Raisi as an ayatollah rather than the lower ranking hojatoleslam. Soon after, [profiles](#) began emerging that trumpeted Raisi as a potential successor to Khamenei himself.

Raisi started his new position at a time when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) had just been inked. But he soon used his new perch in Mashhad as a means to needle President Hassan Rouhani. According to a [report](#) in the *Financial Times* in January 2017, "hardliners...prevented politicians close to Mr. Rouhani from making speeches in the city in recent months and cancelled music concerts."

Just over a year into his tenure, Raisi [entered](#) the 2017 presidential race. It was a bold move for Raisi—challenging an incumbent president. Since 1981, every Iranian president had won reelection. But Rouhani was encountering a different electoral landscape from Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad. It was his administration that had concluded a high-stakes nuclear deal with the west.

In challenging Rouhani, Raisi [emphasized](#) that while he was reluctant to run for the presidency, he did so because he believed it was his "religious and revolutionary responsibility." This Iranian political humility is similar to Khamenei's own experience before ascending to the supreme leadership, pleading that he was [unqualified](#) for the post.

Raisi focused heavily on economic issues in the campaign—specifically what he felt was the Rouhani administration's failure to deliver despite the JCPOA. His official website [proclaimed](#) "The Islamic establishment is four decades' old and while we have had achievements and progress, people are still suffering from chronic structural problems and mismanagement which are preventing the government from responding to people's demands and fulfilling constitutional aims...Can't we resolve issues such as recession, unemployment and obstacles in the way of businesses?... I deeply believe that this can change." He also used his status as the head of Astan-e Quds Razavi as a credential to make himself more accessible to the needier classes of Iran. Upon registering, he [said](#), "[m]y mission in AQR [Astan-e Quds Razavi] has been to help the poor and from the day one we created a department to aid the poor."

Beyond his contretemps against Rouhani, Raisi's candidacy carried symbolic importance. Given the speculation surrounding him being a contender to succeed Khamenei as supreme leader, the presidency would be a natural steppingstone for Raisi because of Khamenei having previously served as president. It was a way for him to test his brand electorally as well as deploy the vast resources and platform that Astan-e Quds Razavi provides. In fact, Raisi's candidacy carried the perceived imprimatur of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). [Pictures circulated](#) of him in a chair, with senior commanders of the IRGC—including its then Commander-in-Chief Mohammad Ali Jafari and then Commander of the Quds

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Force Qassem Soleimani—seated at his knee. The picture was a sign of deference for Raisi.



Seated from Left to Right: Ebrahim Raisi, former Commander of the IRGC-Basij Forces Mohammed Reza Naqdi, former Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Mohammad Ali Jafari, and former Commander of the IRGC-Quds Force Qassem Soleimani

Raisi framed his [candidacy](#) as one “for the whole of Iran. I don’t limit myself to a certain group, party, or faction.” In doing so, he didn’t make a strong impression in the first debate against Rouhani, where he [focused](#) mostly on a populist message and ceded much of the barbs to more seasoned political athletes like then-Mayor of Tehran Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. In fact, Raisi attempted to make himself more accessible to moderate voters by posting a video [lauding](#) his wife, Jamileh Alamolhoda, who is a professor at Shahid Beheshti University. He claimed, “[i]f I go home and she’s not there, I don’t mind. If there is no supper, I don’t mind. I genuinely believe that her work helps her and the country...and she is having an impact.” This more pragmatic view of a wife’s role stood in contrast to the traditionalist nature of figures like Khamenei, whose wife once [remarked](#) in a rare interview that “[h]e doesn’t expect anything but a happy, calm, and healthy family environment.” Additionally, Raisi tried to appeal to younger voters, appearing alongside rapper Amir Tataloo. It was another unconventional [move](#) for Raisi as a former deputy chief justice, because Tataloo had been imprisoned in 2016 for 62 days for “encouraging corruption and prostitution among the youth.”

However, despite Raisi’s attempts to portray himself as above the fray and modern, his campaign included operatives associated with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s conservative administration, most especially his campaign manager, [Ali Nikzad](#), who served in Ahmadinejad’s cabinet. In the second debate, Raisi [sparred](#) with Rouhani over the JCPOA, charging that the deal had not redounded to Tehran’s benefit and asking, “Dear people! Our question is whether the wheels of the economy are turning. Businessmen: are you able to do business?” In a speech, Rouhani took direct aim at Raisi, saying Iranians would not vote for “those who have only known how to execute and jail people.” That’s not to mention that Raisi received a boost from Ghalibaf, a Rouhani critic, when he withdrew and endorsed Raisi’s campaign. Ghalibaf pleaded with his supporters “to contribute their full capacity and support for the success of my brother, Ebrahim Raisi.” Raisi in turn [called](#) Ghalibaf’s withdrawal a “revolutionary act.”

But in the end, Raisi lost the 2017 presidential election, [receiving](#) 38 percent of the vote, compared with <sup>10</sup>

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Rouhani winning 57 percent. That didn't prevent Raisi from [accusing](#) his opponents of voter fraud.

After his loss, Raisi continued to lead Astan-e Quds Razavi while also working to further raise his profile. In this period, Raisi attempted to build his relationship with Iran's broader Axis of Resistance—namely Hezbollah. In January 2018, he made an important [trip](#) to Lebanon to visit Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and other officials. Raisi generated headlines when he was [pictured](#) touring the border between Israel and Lebanon, proclaiming “Jerusalem's liberation is near” and commenting that Hezbollah's brand is more than military and that it encompasses “diverse tasks in building Islamic culture.” The optics of Raisi's visit to Lebanon spoke volumes—namely of his ambition. It was a bold move after losing his bid to become president. But it demonstrated that Raisi still maintained a powerful platform at the helm of Astan-e Quds Razavi and that he still had his eyes on even higher office.

## Chief Justice

In December 2018, Iran's supreme leader began making consequential personnel decisions that would affect Raisi's career trajectory. After the death of former Chairman of Iran's Expediency Council Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, Khamenei [elevated](#) Sadegh Larijani, then chief justice, as his successor. The Expediency Council is a body that resolves differences between parliament and the Guardian Council. Larijani was nearing the end of his term at the helm of the judiciary in August 2019, after spending close to a decade in the powerful position. But Larijani would not occupy both positions for long. In March 2019, Iran's supreme leader [appointed](#) Raisi as Larijani's successor as chief justice. Such a move raised eyebrows as it came months before Larijani's term was scheduled to end. If that promotion wasn't enough, [days](#) later, Raisi became deputy chairman of the Assembly of Experts, [beating](#) out Larijani himself.

Raisi has thus positioned himself well in the battle for succession as Khamenei ages. He controls one branch of government while commanding a leadership post in the body that is formally vested with the authority to select Iran's next supreme leader. While Larijani was once thought to be a leading contender to become supreme leader, Raisi has systematically tarnished his brand, launching an anti-corruption case [against](#) Larijani's former deputy, Akbar Tabari. Indeed, Larijani himself [argued](#) the revelations—the trial has been broadcast on state television—were part of a “pre-planned scenario” to sully his image. Raisi also [claimed](#) credit for the firing of at least 60 judges from the Larijani era. Raisi has additionally used anti-corruption as a political weapon against the Rouhani administration, with the president's [brother](#), the [son-in-law](#) of his labor minister, the [daughter](#) of his former industry minister, and his former [vice president for women and family affairs](#) being targeted under the watch of the new chief justice.

At the same time, Raisi has attempted to win plaudits from more pragmatic power centers in Iran—instituting stricter financial transparency measures for senior officials and ordering an [investigation](#) into “possible negligence” surrounding the death of a social media activist in prison. That's not to mention the temporary [release](#) of prisoners amid the coronavirus outbreak and the judiciary's [decision](#) in July 2020 to order a retrial after outrage spread over the death sentences of three protesters detained after the unrest surrounding the new gas policy in November 2019.

The position of chief justice brings added advantages for Raisi as he now sits on the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) as well as the Supreme Economic Coordination Council (SECC). Both positions enhance his resume as prior to 2019, Raisi had never served on either. The SNSC has given him firsthand experience in national security policymaking, and the SECC has grown into an important political body, 11 which, at times, has circumvented Iran's legislative chamber. He has also courted members of the broader

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Axis of Resistance—for example, calling Ismail Haniyeh, the head of [Hamas'](#) political bureau, in April 2020. Raisi has played a leading role in mobilizing Iran's legal response to the strike, which killed former IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, and was prominently pictured at Khamenei's side at the late Commander's funeral. The optics spoke volumes.



Left to Right: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Chief Justice Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi at the funeral of former IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani

## Conclusion

Ebrahim Raisi's career has been advanced by steady promotion by Iran's supreme leader, an influential family base of power, and a shrewd ability to maximize his visibility and image. Raisi has developed a political brand base focused on anti-corruption and populism. Raisi is an important figure to watch as he checks a number of boxes, such as ties to military security forces, to be a contender for the next Supreme Leader. It is worth mentioning again, however, that the Supreme Leader has not made his decision about his successor.

Raisi has now thrown his hat into the ring again for the June 2021 presidential election. As such, he is the first sitting chief justice to run. But his candidacy brings risks, as he could lose for a second time, potentially hurting his chances to succeed Khamenei. While the regime has stacked the deck in his favor, winning the presidency may turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory. Dissatisfaction with the regime is at an all-time high due to continued economic stagnation, increased repression of protests, and the government's lack of transparency and inept handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Iranians plan on boycotting the election and, as a result, have lost faith in Iran's republican elements to address their grievances.

Should Raisi win the presidency, he will probably look to promoting his brand of populism and anti-corruption. He inherits massive economic problems compounded by decades of structural issues and mismanagement. The president is constitutionally disempowered to meaningfully alter the course of Iran's public policy trajectory but often has more discretion in economic policy and thus receives more blame. <sup>12</sup>

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The Islamic Republic's core foreign policy trajectory, which is ultimately decided by the Supreme Leader, will probably continue.

## **Potential first Tier:**

### **Abdolnaser Hemmati**



The 64-year old economist and politician Abdolnaser Hemmati was the director of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) from 2018 until late May 2021, when [President Hassan Rouhani](#) removed him after it became clear that he would be a front runner for Reformist and centrist factions due to the Guardian Council's disqualification of candidates. Hemmati belongs to the Executives of Construction Party, originally a traditional center-right party constituted by technocrats formed by former President and Islamic Republic co-founder Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani that has been close with Reformists.

As CBI director between 2018 and 2021, Hemmati oversaw a tumultuous period under the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign. Many credit him with implementing some stability in the foreign exchange market.

Shortly before Hemmati took the helm at the CBI, the Trump administration [designated](#) Hemmati's predecessor Valiollah Seif and a senior staff officer for facilitating the transfer of millions of dollars through the central bank itself to allow the Qods Force to fund its activities abroad.

The Islamic Republic's financial sector and CBI have previously been targeted with sanctions due to their role in the finance of illicit activities. Under the Obama administration in 2011, the United States [designated](#) the entire Iranian financial sector, including the CBI, as a jurisdiction of "primary money laundering concern."

Between 2006 and 2016, Hemmati was the CEO of Sina Bank and Bank Mellat, both of which were designated by the United States and the European Union for a series of illicit activities such as facilitating [13](#) weapons proliferation and finances for the Qods Force, the external operations branch of the [Islamic](#)

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[Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#). The European Union designated Hemmati in 2011 in his capacity as Sina Bank CEO but then delisted him under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Hemmati also served as the board chairman at Future Bank, designated in 2008 by the US for acting on behalf of Bank Mellat. The US delisted these entities under the JCPOA and imposed new sanctions following its exit from the nuclear accord in 2018.

Hemmati began his post-1979 revolution career as an economist in the Agricultural Jihad Ministry. He then transferred to the state-controlled media corporation [Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting \(IRIB\)](#), the regime's primary propaganda arm, where he remained until 1994, reaching senior positions of political deputy and director-general of news broadcasting. At IRIB, Hemmati worked for a decade with then-director Mohammad Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the younger brother of Akbar. After his tenure at IRIB, he served as the director of the Central Insurance Corporation until the mid-2000s, and he is [credited](#) in the media as the "father" of private insurances in the Islamic Republic.

## **Relations with the Supreme Leader**

Before becoming the CBI director, Hemmati was the CEO of banks that facilitated illicit financial transactions for sensitive programs. The EU in 2011 described Sina Bank as "very closely linked to the interests" of the Office of the Supreme Leader. He has continuously received promotions and would need the sign-off of the Office of the Supreme Leader to be the CBI director. Although he is not as close to the Supreme Leader as [Raisi](#), he still managed to pass the screening of the Guardian Council, which vets candidates based on an opaque set of criteria to ensure loyalty to the Supreme Leader and the principles of the Islamic Revolution.

## **Electoral Prospects**

After the Guardian Council disqualified all prominent candidates who could be classified as Reformist or Reformist-aligned pragmatists, many in those factions argue that there is little choice other than to try to rally around Hemmati, making him the main candidate for those camps.

Hemmati faces an uphill battle. He was widely considered a candidate who registered at the last minute ahead of Guardian Council vetting. He has not yet acquired the official backing of Reformists, but that may change in the days leading up to the election to generate support and enthusiasm. Hemmati's hopes center on distinguishing himself during the televised debates and generating a wave of support. In the first debate, former IRGC head Mohsen Rezaei [threatened](#) to have Hemmati and other Rouhani officials tried for treason due to their managerial failures. Hemmati alleged other Principlist candidates on the panel as surrogates for Raisi. Hemmati argued that he had helped prevent the economy from going off a cliff and become another Venezuela after the reimposition of sanctions under the US maximum pressure campaign. Hemmati has argued that he is running to prevent Iran from facing total isolation like North Korea. Hemmati pleaded for Iranians to abandon their apathy and vote for his technocratic competence. It is unclear whether Hemmati can convince many in the electorate that a Reformist or Reformist-backed president cannot fulfill campaign promises.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Tier:**

**Saeed Jalili**

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The 55-year old self-proclaimed revolutionary Saeed Jalili is making his second bid for the presidency after a failed run in 2013. Known as a rigid ideologue and true believer in the founding principles of the Islamic Republic, his official campaign slogan this year is “great jihad for Iran’s leap.” He has a political science doctorate from Imam Sadeq University.

His [positions](#) since his last run include the Representative of the Supreme Leader to the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), member of the Expediency Council, and member of the Foreign Relations Strategic Council. Under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, he served as chief nuclear negotiator and the Secretary of the SNSC between 2007 and 2013. He was infamous for his unyielding stance against compromise over Iran’s nuclear program, forestalling any chance at a diplomatic breakthrough during his tenure. His positions before that include deputy Foreign Minister for Europe and America. Jalili fought in the Iran-Iraq War, where he sustained injury and lost his right leg.

## **Relations with Supreme Leader**

Jalili has been the Supreme Leader’s Representative to the SNSC for a number of years, indicating that he continues to be in Khamenei’s good graces.

## **Electoral Prospects**

Frustrated by the failures of his diplomatic rigidity to deliver sanctions relief, voters strongly rebuked Jalili in 2013, handing him a third-place finish garnering about 11% in the official results. In May, Tasnim News, affiliated with the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#), [reported](#) that Jalili would withdraw if Raisi ran, as most Principlist candidates have done. He has been unable to receive the endorsements of other Principlists, and his own faction, the Steadfastness Front, has declared its support of Raisi. He faces an even bigger uphill battle with the rest of the Iranian population. Some critics believe that Jalili is a component of the attack team for Raisi. He will probably face increasing pressure from Principlists to withdraw following the debates, but it is unclear he would.

## Mohsen Rezaei



This cycle marks the fourth presidential bid of 66-year old Mohsen Rezaei, former overall Commander of [the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) in the 1980s and 1990s and the current Secretary of the Expediency Council, which resolves issues between the Parliament and the Guardian Council.

### Relations with the Supreme Leader

Mohsen Rezaei has remained in the orbit of insiders around Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, but he is not considered a particularly close confidant or key decision-maker. He had a son, Ahmad, who was publicly critical of the Islamic Republic. Ahmad was [found](#) dead in a Dubai hotel in 2011.

### Electoral Prospects

Rezaei's seemingly perpetual, unsuccessful bids have turned him into the subject of [jokes](#) among many Iranians. In his last bid in 2013, he finished fourth behind Saeed Jalili at 10%. In the first debate, he claimed that moderate candidate Abdolnaser Hemmati and other Rouhani officials should be tried for treason due to the failures of their engagement with the West to improve the lives of Iranians. It remains unclear whether Rezaei would heed the pressure of Principlists to withdraw in favor of Raeisi following the debates.

## Alireza Zakani

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The Principlist politician and Parliament member Alireza Zakani is making his third bid for president after being disqualified by the Guardian Council in 2017 and 2013. The [campaign](#) slogan is “the administration of action and reform.” He has [promised](#) that “America will beg if I’m elected president.” He has a degree in nuclear medicine.

Zakani is the chairman of the parliament Research Center and is a representative from Qom, winning a seat in the 2020 elections. He was previously in Parliament for three sessions but lost his seat in a Tehran voting district in 2016. While in Parliament, he has been a prominent critic of the Rouhani administration and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He has owned Jahan News and Panjereh weekly news agencies.

Zakani’s previous record includes serving as the Commander of the paramilitary Basij University Organization during the crackdown in the infamous 1999 student protests when it was [alleged](#) that Basij university mobilized as part of the crackdown. He has defended his determination to “stop the sedition” during the protests. Zakani fought in the Iran-Iraq War, and the units he served in include Irregular Warfare Headquarters and the 27<sup>th</sup> Mohammad Rasulollah Division (Tehran Province).

## **Relationship with Supreme Leader**

Zakani has publicly expressed loyalty to Supreme Leader but has not garnered a high-ranking appointment by Khamenei before.

## **Electoral Prospects**

Zakani is the chairman of the Revolutionary Transformation-Seekers Front, constituted by three Principlist factions. He faces an uphill battle for the Principlist vote, as polls show him in last place among the contenders. He has a reputation as a hard-line figure among many Iranians. Some critics believe that he is also a component of the attack team on the debate panel in favor of Raisi, but it is unclear whether he would withdraw following the debates.

## **Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi**



The 2021 cycle marks 49-year old Principlist Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh’s first bid for the presidency. His campaign platform is the “government of peace,” calling for “dialogue between the administration and the people.”

A physician, Ghazizadeh has served in the Parliament since 2008, representing a district in Khorasan-e Razavi Province, and has [been](#) in the Parliament Presidium for several terms, serving as the first Vice-Chairman to the Speaker in the current Parliament. He was a member of the Islamic Revolution Steadfastness Front, a notable “hardline” faction of which presidential candidate Saeed Jalili has been a member, and was its spokesman for about a year. Ghazizadeh has [joined](#) the recently formed Islamic Law Party.

### **Relationship with Supreme Leader**

Ghazizadeh has not received a formal appointment from the Supreme Leader and is not known to have an especially close relationship with him, but he is considered a steadfast loyalist of Khamenei regardless.

### **Election Prospect**

Ghazizadeh faces an uphill battle to garner the votes of Principlist factions and figures, most of who have declared their support for Raisi. As a relatively unknown public figure, he faces an even harder uphill battle to attract votes from the rest of the Iranian population. Some critics speculate he has registered to attract some votes for Raisi, pointing to his promise to dissolve compulsory service, and then withdraw to endorse Raisi following the debates, but it is unclear he would.

### **Mohsen Mehralizadeh**

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The 64-year old Reformist Mohsen Mehralizadeh previously ran in the 2005 presidential elections. He is running on a campaign platform of “the administration of life.” He has [said](#) on his website that he is “finishing” his PhD in economics engineering from the Netherlands Tillburg University.

He was appointed by the Rouhani administration as Esfahan Province Governor in 2017 and left his [position](#) a year later following a law that capped the hiring of retirees in government posts. He was deputy president and head of the Sports Organization and Khorasan Governor during the terms of the Khatami administration (1997-2005). His other [positions](#) include deputy minister of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) and chairman or member of the board of directors in a number of companies like Saipa Vehicle manufacturing company in the 1980s. He helped co-found an [IRGC](#) unit in Maragheh County in northwestern Azarbaijan Province and led it for three years following the 1979 revolution. Mehralizadeh also co-founded the county’s Islamic Revolution Committee, which functioned as a law enforcement agency following the revolution enforcing public morality laws.

## Relationship with Supreme Leader

Mehralizadeh is not known to enjoy a close relationship with the Supreme Leader and has not received a formal appointment by him. In the 2005 presidential elections, the Supreme Leader reinstated Mehralizadeh and another Reformist, Mostafa Moin, after the Guardian Council initially disqualified them and every Reformist figure running for president. Mehralizadeh’s approval in the 2021 round of vetting shows that some describe him as a “token” candidate from the Reformist camp.

## Election Prospects

Mehralizadeh lacks a viable path to the presidency. He previously finished dead last in the 2005 presidential elections. In this round of the election, he is trying to generate enthusiasm and support by presenting himself as the best option for moderates and Reformists and vowing to fight for political liberalization, but has not clarified how he would be different than previous candidates who promised similar measures. While he is the most reform-oriented candidate in the race, as a figure lacking national stature, Mehralizadeh was [not among the 14 candidates](#) put forth by the Reformists’ umbrella movement, which has opted not to throw its backing behind him. Mehralizadeh raised eyebrows in the first presidential debate after criticizing front-runner [Ebrahim Raisi](#) for lacking the necessary education to be president, a charge which he retracted in the following debate. It is unclear whether he would be able to [perform better than Hemmati](#), and if he would withdraw in Hemmati’s favor.

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