

Profile: Speaker of Iran's Parliament Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf

September 2022



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Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf

In June 2022, the Islamic Consultative Council, also known as the Majles or Parliament, [elected](#) Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf as its speaker for the third consecutive year. In 2020, Ghalibaf took over from Ali Larijani, who was the longest-serving speaker in the history of the Islamic Republic. As the head of one of the three branches, the speaker sits on Iran’s Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and the Supreme Economic Coordination Council.

Ghalibaf is a self-described neoconservative, leading his faction in Iran’s Parliament. Most analysts associate Iran’s neoconservative movement with the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but Ghalibaf [uses the term](#) in an attempt to chart out a middle-ground between moderate and hardline conservatives. While remaining committed to revolutionary ideals—and a staunch supporter of the supreme leader—he also leverages a technocratic pedigree in Iranian politics. Accordingly, throughout the years, he has alternated between branding himself as a hardline authoritarian and a pragmatic modernizer.

Given his demonstrated allegiance to the Islamic Republic, first as a military official, and then as the chief of police, his rise in politics with the backing of the supreme leader should come as no surprise. After serving as chief of police during a sensitive period in the Islamic Republic, he made an unsuccessful bid for the presidency, but became mayor of Tehran. He served in that capacity for 12 years, then made another unsuccessful run at the presidency. Despite several well-founded

allegations of corruption against him, he has yet to see the inside of a courtroom. What is more, no investigation into his actions as mayor has been made public.



Ghalibaf during the Iran-Iraq War.

Military Career

Ghalibaf was [born](#) in 1961 in the town of Tarbaqeh near Mashhad in today’s northeastern Khorasan-e Razavi Province. His first exposure to combat came after he joined the Basij paramilitary and deployed to fight in the brutal counterinsurgency against Kurdish rebels in the West. When the Iran-Iraq War began in 1980, Ghalibaf joined the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#), soon becoming one of its youngest commanders. At the age of 22 years old, he ascended to become commander of the IRGC’s Fifth Nasr Division, which led Operation Dawn, one of the Iranian human wave offensives in 1983. Multiple reports suggest that, as a part of these offensives, he personally [ordered](#) soldiers to sweep minefields with their bodies.

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As one of the IRGC's youngest commanders, he developed close ties with [Ali Khamenei \(who is also from Mashhad\)](#), [Qasem Soleimani](#), [Esmail Ghaani](#), [Nour Ali Shoustari](#), and other future leaders of the IRGC. Scholar Ali Alfoneh [noted](#) that Khamenei often visited the Fifth Nasr Division during the Iran-Iraq War. Ghaani served as Ghalibaf's [deputy](#) and was later his [successor](#) as the commander of the Fifth Nasr Division at the end of the war. These connections—particularly with Khamenei—would prove instrumental in his rise.

Ghalibaf's ascension to the regime's top ranks coincided with Khamenei's ascension as supreme leader in 1989. He [became](#) deputy commander of the Basij with Khamenei's blessing. The supreme leader also appointed Ghalibaf to head the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters in 1994, and he served in that position for three years during the post-war reconstruction. In this period, the IRGC expanded its footprint in the Iranian economy. Later, Ghalibaf became the commander of the IRGC-Air Force from 1997-2000. During his tenure, he warned then-reformist President Mohammad Khatami that he would be removed from office if he did not act more aggressively against student protestors, in an infamous [letter](#) dated July 1999 that he signed onto alongside other IRGC commanders.

Afterward, the supreme leader appointed Ghalibaf chief of police or the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran (LEF). Khamenei's selection of Ghalibaf signaled his confidence that Ghalibaf would [professionalize](#) the LEF during a sensitive period in the Islamic Republic, as his predecessor Hedayat Lotfian was [ousted](#) following the student protests. It was also a check on then-President Khatami during his second term, as Ghalibaf was one of the original signatories to the aforementioned July 1999 public letter. A tape later [emerged](#) of Ghalibaf bragging to the Basij paramilitary about how he ordered police to fire at student demonstrators in 2003.

“The Most Corrupt Commander”

Ghalibaf has shown ambition for the presidency several times but has thus far come up short. Yet, he has managed to acquire important positions like mayor of Tehran and parliament speaker. In recent years, he has been implicated and linked to a series of corruption scandals; his relationship and usefulness to powerful officials have shielded him from prosecution. Some call him “[the most corrupt commander](#)” in Iran.



Ghalibaf in 2004 in Amin Police Academy

After his tenure at the helm of the LEF, Ghalibaf entered Iran's political scene, [running](#) and losing

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in the 2005 presidential race. After his loss, Ghalibaf became mayor of Tehran, viewing that as a platform to launch himself to president. He again embarked on a run for the presidency in 2013. Rouhani [won](#) 50.7 percent of the votes, and Ghalibaf came in second place with 16.6 percent.

Four years later, he again ran against Rouhani for president, but faced opposition from the principlist camp, in large part because of his public links to corruption. In the 2017 presidential debates, former President Hassan Rouhani claimed that Ghalibaf in 2005 struck a deal to set free some large smugglers of narcotics and fuel in exchange for helping his campaign; Rouhani at the time was at the Supreme National Security Council, but the file on Ghalibaf never proceeded. Ghalibaf withdrew from the election and [endorsed](#) Rouhani's challenger [Ebrahim Raisi](#). Ghalibaf flirted with running for the presidency in the 2021 elections again, but did not enter the race after Raisi announced his run.

Mayor of Tehran

Ghalibaf was voted into the office of mayor of Tehran in 2005 by the 31-member City Council, and he served in that capacity until 2017. His mayoral tenure was [defined](#) by infrastructural feats, with some of the most lucrative infrastructure contracts [being awarded](#) to his former engineering firm, the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbia. He expanded the Tehran metro and the Sadr Expressway and [established](#) new green spaces within Tehran. However, some of these projects were ill-advised. The city spent a fortune on the Sadr Expressway, instead of building much-needed transportation infrastructure between the affluent north of the city and the city's southern reaches. Urban planners say that the poorly-researched project, which costed the city \$2.5 billion, [made traffic worse](#). The artificial Chitgar lake in northwestern Tehran [resulted in](#) environmental degradation.

As infrastructure projects got underway, Ghalibaf turned to the international stage, with a cameo at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2008. There he [sought](#) to distance himself from then-President Ahmadinejad, claiming that the president's anti-Westernism and isolationist policies were hampering foreign investment in Iran. In Davos, he [pledged](#) to open the country up to more foreign investment, and indicated he was flirting with another run for the presidency.

Ghalibaf's 12-year [tenure](#) as mayor has been linked to a series of scandals and corruption. One of the most prominent cases was the municipality [selling](#) massive properties to several officials in the affluent northern Tehran at a heavy discount. In 2016, *Memari News* [published](#) a classified report prepared by the General Inspection Office on Ghalibaf's corrupt property sales. The report found that the mayor had "illegally" sold "Tehran municipality's residential, commercial, [and] public use property." Strong public condemnation against Ghalibaf followed, and has not subsided to this day. Criticism mounted after he became speaker, leading him to [reportedly](#) tender his resignation to the supreme leader, who would not let him resign. The supreme leader thought it would tarnish the regime's reputation and weaken the legislative branch of government.

In 2017, a former council member [accused](#) Ghalibaf's wife, Zahra Sadat-Moshir, in the property corruption scandal. Moshir's charity was one among many beneficiaries; other Ghalibaf allies,

including members of his team, former city councilor Morteza Talaei, and the IRGC's Cooperative Foundation, also received property from the city at cut-rate prices. The IRGC was [allegedly](#) one of the main recipients of the properties, with many parcels of land going to the IRGC's Intelligence Organization to expand its network of safe houses. Furthermore, during the 2009 post-election protests, Ghalibaf [provided](#) municipal facilities for those who suppressed the protests.



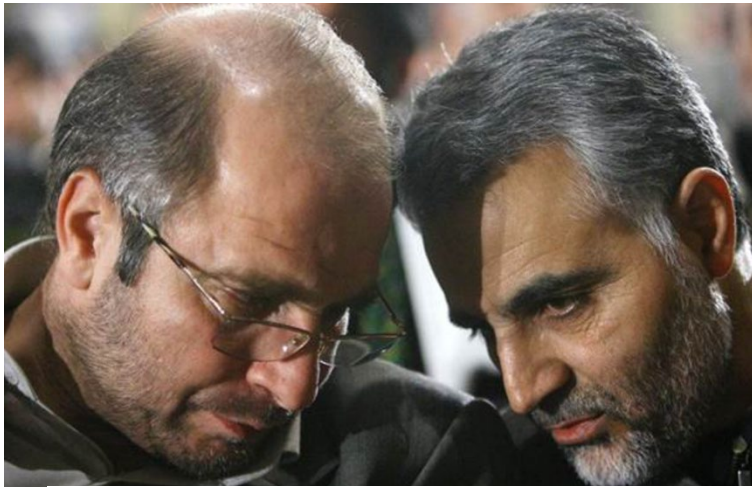
Ghalibaf Campaigning for President while Mayor of Tehran

Ghalibaf's successor as mayor, Mohammad-Ali Najafi, submitted a report to the Tehran City Council alleging that municipality officials under Ghalibaf had drawn up illegal contracts for the sale of property, and that Ghalibaf had [embezzled](#) over \$540,000 to pay for his 2017 presidential campaign. Tehran's prosecutor at the time, along with Ghalibaf supporters, strongly criticized the report. Najafi soon resigned due to what a member of Tehran's City Council [declared to be](#) "pressure of a security agency" and "humiliating treatment by the prosecutor's office."

Pirouz Hanachi, the reformist who became mayor of Tehran in 2018, led an effort to seize some of the properties that Ghalibaf sold to his allies. Hanachi [said](#) that the municipality had repossessed some 6,000 square meters of land that Ghalibaf had illegally transferred—a paltry sum given that Ghalibaf stands accused of transferring [80,000 square meters](#) of land to his wife's charity. It remains to be seen whether the city will collect on debts owed to it by IRGC-affiliated companies. Rasa Tejarat, according to other members of the City Council, [owes](#) over a billion dollars as a result of the illegal transactions, but has refused to pay. Yas Financial Holding—a now-defunct subsidiary of IRGC Cooperative Foundation—is accused of owing \$11 billion.

The supreme leader [ordered](#) an investigation into the IRGC-linked corruption case, but an indictment was never brought against Ghalibaf. Some observers attribute Parliament's decision to shelve its own investigation into Ghalibaf to his close relationship with Khamenei. On the other hand, Ghalibaf is [said to have bribed](#) Parliament members in 2016 to the tune of \$22 million in order for them to drop the investigation. A former MP was [reportedly](#) arrested in connection with the bribery case, but Ghalibaf denied his involvement, and sued the Parliament member who made these allegations, Mostafa Mir-Salim, along with three journalists who followed the bribery case. A current member of Tehran's City Council Mohammad Haqshenas alleged that Ghalibaf erased \$22 million of debt of the brother of a former Parliament member, Abolfazi Mousavi.

In 2021, Ghalibaf's former deputy at the municipality Issa Sharifi [was sentenced](#) to 20 years by a military court for involvement in a multi-billion-dollar corruption scandal related to Yas Financial Holding. This conviction casted a shadow over Ghalibaf's political career; however, despite these blemishes in his record, the supreme leader has maintained his support for Ghalibaf.



Left to Right: Ghalibaf with Qasem Soleimani

In February 2022, an audio recording of then-IRGC commander-in-chief Mohammad Ali Jafari and his economic affairs deputy further implicated Ghalibaf, along with former Quds Force chief [Qasem Soleimani](#), in a conspiracy to transfer funds to the IRGC. The recording revealed that Ghalibaf, while mayor, [sought to cover](#) up a \$2 billion embezzlement scheme. According to Jafari's economic affairs deputy, Ghalibaf demanded that he sign a fraudulent memorandum on behalf of the IRGC with Tehran municipality

to cover up the missing funds identified in an audit of the IRGC Cooperative Foundation, the main arm of which was Yas Holding. The recording showed that the deputy refused, but then-chief of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization Hossein Taeb, who is close to the supreme leader, [supported the plan](#). Soleimani reportedly knew about the financial crimes, which seemed to contradict the supreme leader's order that 90 percent of Yas Holding's earnings from real estate dealings should be transferred to the Quds Force.

Instead of resulting in an investigation into Ghalibaf, however, the audio file leak [resulted in](#) the arrest of Mohammad Ghaemi by the IRGC's Intelligence Organization (IRGC-IO), after a complaint was made by Ghalibaf. At the time, the IRGC-IO was led by Hossein Taeb, a Ghalibaf supporter. Ghaemi was formerly in charge of liquidating Yas Holding after the firm was disbanded due to corruption allegations.

Speaker of Parliament

Political analysts differ over when the neoconservative movement—today championed by Ghalibaf—emerged from infighting within the conservative camp. Some [say](#) that the movement took root during the 2005 presidential election, which resulted in the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Others pin its origins to the 2013 presidential election, when Ghalibaf carved out his own political platform, distinct from the hardline conservatives. The latter analysts see Ghalibaf as the progenitor of this new movement, both opposed to the reformist position of former President Khatami, and critical of some revolutionary ideals.

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Compared to hardline conservatives, such as former nuclear negotiator in the Ahmadinejad administration [Saeed Jalili](#), who has reportedly [advocated](#) exiting the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and [ramping](#) up enrichment to 90% purity, Ghalibaf has taken a more moderate position on the 2015 Nuclear Deal. He [left open](#) the possibility of Iran rejoining the accord on the condition that western powers abide by their obligations, but at the same time he clearly supports driving a hardline in the negotiations. He [said](#), for example, that no additional terms would be negotiated beyond the original scope of the deal. On other foreign policy issues, such as Financial Action Task Force (FATF) legislation, he tends to side with the more conservative position and oppose reformists. Compliance with FATF—an anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism financing intergovernmental body—would require the Islamic Republic to end its support for terrorist groups such as [Hezbollah](#) and [Hamas](#). It could lead to better economic relations and a more modernized Iran, but has been a subject of considerable debate among reformists and principlists, with the latter camp [opposed](#)



Mohammad Ghalibaf in Parliament

to any obstacles to terror financing. Most reformists, who previously had the backing of former President Rouhani, consider Iran’s blacklisted status by FATF to be a major impediment to improving Iran’s banking and financial ties with the West, however Ghalibaf [has said](#) that complying with FATF’s recommendations would be “to [Iran’s] detriment.”

In 2020, Ghalibaf [won](#) a seat in Parliament as Tehran’s representative, capitalizing on low voter turnout in Tehran and name recognition. Conservative parties [dominated](#) the 2020 parliamentary elections, while reformist parties fared poorly, owing in part to the fact that many of the latter were disqualified by the conservative Guardian Council. The conservative camp in Parliament was thereafter plagued by infighting in the run up to the vote for speaker. Such infighting cost them the presidency in 2013 and 2017, [noted](#) one political commentator. Nevertheless, a few months later, Ghalibaf [won](#) 230 out of the 267 votes cast by the 290 members of Parliament for speaker, despite frequent attacks against him for his involvement in corruption while mayor of Tehran.

How Ghalibaf managed to win the speakership in a landslide despite the fact that the main conservative factions—the traditional conservatives, the hardline Paydari Front, and the pro-Ahmadinejad factions—[allied](#) against him is not exactly clear. According to one pro-Ahmadinejad MP, the three allied blocs [had](#) 170 MPs out of 200 conservative MPs in the 290-member body. Ghalibaf was reportedly invited to join the alliance, which called itself the “Committee of Seven,” but did not show up, perhaps because it [barred](#) anyone with an intention of running for president in 2021 from a bid for the speakership.

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Some analysts hold that Ghalibaf gained support of the other conservatives by pledging that leadership roles in key committees, such as the Budget Committee, the National Security and Foreign Relations Committee, and Article 90, would go to the Paydari Front. Others [believe](#) that this landslide victory amid intra-party divisions indicated the intervention of the Office of the Supreme Leader. The IRGC could have also played a role. For instance, the IRGC likely helped suppress corruption investigations, as it was also implicated. And those politicians who wished to expose Ghalibaf's corruption in political attacks had to tread cautiously, so as not to undermine the IRGC. Still other analysts [see](#) the help of the few reformists in the 11th Parliament, who viewed Ghalibaf as sitting on the moderate end of Iran's conservative spectrum, including with regard to the nuclear deal.

The Paydari Front considers Ghalibaf to be a moderate, whose positions are not very different from the reformists. The front, led by Morteza Tehrani, condemned Ghalibaf for his involvement in corruption and disdained his intermittent support of the nuclear deal. This powerful political bloc has at times insinuated that Ghalibaf is not loyal to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, his 230-vote victory suggested that he garnered the support of at least some of the hardliners. The result was that the Paydari Front came [to dominate](#) the key committees and continued to do so in 2021. The Guardian Council disqualified over [7,000 moderate candidates](#) from running in the parliamentary elections, ensuring that few of them were voted into parliament. Therefore, they were easily excluded from discussions relating to the next speaker and leadership positions in parliament.

On several occasions in the past, the conservatives sought to resolve their differences, even [forming](#) an unofficial council to manage a more unified campaign one year prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections. Meetings were reportedly held between top conservative figures, including Ebrahim Raisi, Mohammad Ghalibaf, [Saeed Jalili](#), and [Mohsen Rezaee](#). Ghalibaf reportedly emerged as the central figure in the council, even as the infighting continued, with the traditional conservatives [promoting](#) their own candidate, Mostafa Mir-Salim, and many senior conservatives leaving, including the Paydari Front.

In April 2022, while Ghalibaf was campaigning to retain his speakership, photos emerged on the internet of him traveling with excess luggage, including high-end carriages, baby clothing, and accessories, on his return trip from Turkey. These images [prompted calls](#) for his resignation. Seen as emblematic of the lavish lifestyles of regime elites, they were particularly damning because Ghalibaf claims to be a champion of the poor.

An advisor to Ghalibaf [claimed](#) that the photos had been circulated by "political-security circles whose interests are in danger." Ghalibaf's supporters [allege](#) that an intelligence agency linked to the government directed agents to keep watch of Ghalibaf on his travel to Turkey. Among those who made this claim was hardline cleric Mehdi Taeb, the brother of Hossein Taeb. An audio file leaked in which he stated that Ghalibaf had traveled to Turkey on official state business in the past, and [alleged](#) that the brother of Raisi's son-in-law created the leak of Ghalibaf's scandalous

trip to Turkey. To make matters worse for Ghalibaf, at around the same time the photographs went public, an Iranian journalist living in Turkey tweeted that Ghalibaf's wife, daughter, and son-in-law [had purchased](#) luxury apartments in Turkey for \$1.6 million.

Both reformist and conservative opponents of Ghalibaf used these media reports and photographs to attack him in the 2022 election for speaker of Parliament, but the attacks evidently had little impact, as he went on to win the speakership again in June, this time with [193 votes](#). Even though hardline conservative parties controlled a large number of Parliament's seats, they again failed to achieve their goal of ousting him from the speakership.

However, his lackluster performance will threaten support for his initiatives going forward. It remains to be seen whether pressure from outside Parliament will help him advance his policy agenda. The supreme leader's preferences can often sway critical votes in the Parliament, not only for the speakership but for important legislation. When Khamenei, for example, signaled his preference against Parliament's impeachment motion against Raisi cabinet members, the motion [was dismissed](#). The supreme leader, moreover, controls the field of eligible candidates running for parliamentary seats and exercises informal influence behind the legislature and the speaker. He has significantly eroded the Parliament's authority over the years.

Conclusion

Ghalibaf has differentiated himself from hardline principlists, but still falls firmly within their camp. His close ties with the IRGC and the supreme leader affirm his credentials as a regime insider. Not only did Supreme Leader Khamenei play an integral role in Ghalibaf's military career, but also in his subsequent political rise, as he supported Ghalibaf's run for mayor of Tehran and speaker of Parliament. The supreme leader (along with the IRGC) may also be shielding Ghalibaf from prosecution for his corrupt dealings while mayor of Tehran. He is a unique figure within the Iranian system because he recognizes (and sometimes publicly conveys) the economic and geopolitical costs of the mullahs' hardline anti-Westernism and isolationism. Nevertheless, he remains a long-standing fixture in the Iranian regime, with close ties to the IRGC and supreme leader.