

Profile:

Speaker of Iran's Parliament Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf

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Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf

In June 2021, the Islamic Consultative Council, also known as the Majles or parliament, [elected](#) Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf as its speaker for the second consecutive year, a position he has retained [since](#). In 2020, Ghalibaf had taken over from Ali Larijani, who was the longest-serving speaker in the history of the Islamic Republic. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has significantly eroded the Parliament's authority over the years, controlling the field of eligible candidates running for seats and exercising informal influence behind the legislature and the speaker. 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 leads the ascendent hardline faction in Iran's new parliament. A longtime fixture of the regime, Ghalibaf has a revolutionary and technocratic pedigree. Through the years, he has also alternated between branding himself as a pragmatic modernizer and a strident authoritarian.

Military Career

[Born](#) in 1961 in the town of Torqabeh near Mashhad in today's northeastern Khorasan-e Razavi Province, Ghalibaf joined the Basij militia and deployed to fight in the brutal counterinsurgency against Kurdish rebels in the West. He joined the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) after the Iran-Iraq War began (1980-1988) and became one of its youngest commanders. During the Iran-Iraq War, 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. Ghalibaf was at one point the commander of the Fifth Nasr Division. As scholar Ali Alfoneh has [noted](#), Khamenei often visited the Fifth Nasr Division during the war. In fact, 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, and went on to lead two organs of the IRGC. From 1994-97, he was the head of the Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters during the post-war reconstruction marked by the Guard Corps' expanded footprint into the Iranian economy. Later, Ghalibaf became the commander of the IRGC Air Force from 1997-2000. During his tenure, Ghalibaf signed onto the infamous [letter](#) in July 1999 alongside other IRGC commanders, warning then-Reformist President Mohammad Khatami that it would remove him from power if he did not adequately suppress student protests.

Afterward, the Supreme Leader appointed Ghalibaf chief of national police, or the Law

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Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran (LEF). Ghalibaf's selection was significant as his predecessor Hedayat Lotfian was [ousted](#) following the student protests, and it was a signal of Khamenei's confidence in Ghalibaf to [professionalize](#) the LEF during a sensitive period for the Islamic Republic. It was also a check on Khatami during his second term, as Ghalibaf was one of the original signatories to the aforementioned July 1999 public letter. As protests were re-ignited in 2003, Ghalibaf was integral in [directing](#) the regime's brutal repressive action in his role commanding the LEF. A tape later [emerged](#) of Ghalibaf bragging to members of the Basij about how he ordered police to fire at student demonstrators. During this period, he also [ordered](#) the arrest of countless journalists, authors, and activists.

"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 speaker of the parliament. 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. His implication in series of corruption has led some to call him "[the most corrupt commander](#)" in Iran.

After his tenure at the helm of the LEF, Ghalibaf entered Iran's political scene, [running](#) and losing the 2005 presidential race. In the 2017 presidential debates, incumbent 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 made public.

After losing the presidential race, Ghalibaf took over as mayor of Tehran, viewing that as a platform to launch himself to the presidency. Ghalibaf's mayoral tenure was [defined](#) by infrastructural feats, including the expansion of the Tehran metro and the Sadr expressway as well as the [establishment](#) of new green spaces within Tehran. Ghalibaf even made a cameo at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2008, and [sought](#) to distance himself from then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In a New York Times profile, he flirted with another run for the presidency, [pledging](#) to open the country up to more foreign investment.

Ghalibaf's [tenure](#) as mayor between 2005 and 2017 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. A parliamentary investigation into the matter was eventually shelved. A former council member accused that the wives of Ghalibaf and former IRGC Quds Force chief [Qasem Soleimani](#) were involved in corruption. In 2021, Ghalibaf's former deputy at the municipality, Issa Sharifi, was sentenced to 30 years by a

military court for involvement in multi-billion-dollar corruption related to Yas Holding, a now-defunct subsidiary of the IRGC Cooperative Foundation, an entity tasked with managing the paramilitary's vast financial interests. Despite these blemishes on his record, Khamenei managed to find a landing spot for Ghalibaf, [appointing](#) him to the Expediency Council.

Continued Presidential Ambitions and Speakership

Seeking to capitalize on his management record, Ghalibaf embarked on additional runs for the presidency. In 2013, with Rouhani [winning](#) 50.7 percent of the votes, Ghalibaf came in a distant second place with only 16.6 percent. Four years later, he ran against Rouhani again but faced opposition from the others within the hardline camp, in large part because of his public corruption scandals. He withdrew and [endorsed](#) Rouhani's challenger, [Ebrahim Raisi](#). In the 2020 parliamentary elections he mounted a candidacy, capitalizing on low voter turnout and name recognition by [winning](#) a seat from Tehran. He then secured his position as speaker of parliament.

Ghalibaf's tenure as speaker has been marred by sustained corruption scandals. In 2022, he faced a number of [accusations](#). Most notably, [accusations](#) of involvement in the 2017 embezzlement scheme at Yas Holdings continued to mar his reputation. According to a leaked audio recording, he was involved in efforts to cover up the scandal using his regime connections. He was also [accused](#) of purchasing apartments in Turkey through his family and bringing luxury goods into Iran from the country.

Beyond his corruption scandals, Ghalibaf has governed as a hardliner, and demonstrated his ideological alignment with Khamenei. This includes [passing](#) legislation to strengthen morality laws and enforcement practices, [ousting](#) central bank officials who refused to directly support the IRGC, and [seeking](#) to exploit western interest in restoring the JCPOA to secure further sanctions relief from the United States. Such actions provide an indication for how a Ghalibaf presidency may look.

The 2024 parliamentary elections were [marked](#) by low turnout and [discrepancies](#), on the heels of the heavily [engineered](#) 2021 election. Despite this, and continued scrutiny from fellow hardliners over his record of corruption, Ghalibaf was [re-elected](#) as speaker. This came only days after the unexpected death of Ebrahim Raisi, leading some to speculate that he may not run to succeed the deceased president.

Conclusion

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Despite his failed candidacies, Ghalibaf continues to harbor presidential ambitions. He continues to [deny](#) his record of corruption, has strongly [supported](#) Hamas's attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023, and has sought to maintain a [relationship](#) with the regime's terrorist proxies, demonstrating support for an IRGC-led foreign policy. Raisi's death provided him with the opportunity to act upon his ambition now that these pieces are in place. He [declared](#) his intention to run and was quickly seen by many as the apparent [frontrunner](#).

Ultimately, Ghalibaf's political fortunes will depend upon his relationship with Khamenei. Over the course of his career, he has demonstrated his ideological loyalty. He also maintains deep ties to the IRGC, which may prove crucial in securing victory. Some IRGC officials have hinted that the paramilitary may [mobilize](#) its vast resources to support Ghalibaf, much as it did for Raisi. As a result, IRGC-linked media outlets have already offered positive coverage of Ghalibaf's [campaign](#), not least due to Ghalibaf's own service in the paramilitary. It appears possible that Ghalibaf offers the ideological outlook and deference to the IRGC that Khamenei sees necessary in "[purifying](#)" the regime as part of his "Second Phase of the Islamic Revolution." In recent weeks, the IRGC's older cohort have visibly thrown their weight behind the speaker of the parliament. That being said, the widely reported corruption scandals involving Ghalibaf and his family may be a barrier to his presidency. In any case, alongside Saeed Jalili, Ghalibaf should certainly be considered as a frontrunner in the upcoming presidential "election."