

# Alireza Zakani: Mayor of Tehran

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## Alireza Zakani

Alireza Zakani is a controversial figure within the Islamic Republic. [Known](#) for his brash communicative style, record of corruption, and indecent personal conduct by the regime's standards, Zakani appears to be too much of a political liability to be elevated to the presidency. However, behind this mixed public persona, Zakani is a ruthless regime hardliner who [rose to prominence](#) through the [Student Basij Organization](#) (SBO), a notorious Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) militia responsible for violently repressing protests on university campuses and indoctrinating young Iranians. In the last two decades, he has held a prominent role in supporting former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, expressing hardline dissatisfaction over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and [cracking down](#) against political dissent.

## Service in the Basij

Zakani was [born](#) in 1965 into a religious family in the south of Tehran. During the Iran-Iraq War he served in the Basij – seeing combat in fifteen major operations, according to [state media](#). He was [promoted](#) quickly through the ranks, beginning the war as a 16-year-old enlistee and ascending to deputy intelligence commander for his division by its end. This experience laid the foundation for Zakani's later career and hardline political alignment, particularly as he underwent the Basij's extensive program of [indoctrination](#) into the ideological framework of the Islamic Revolution. This was the experience of many other members of the Basij during the conflict, forming a cohort which [rose to political prominence](#) in the mid-2000s through the election of Ahmadinejad.

In 1989, after the war had ended, Zakani [enrolled](#) in Tehran University of Medical Sciences (TUMS), where he studied nuclear medicine. Beyond his academic pursuits, Zakani became deeply enmeshed in the university's branch of the SBO – rapidly ascending to become its leader, and subsequently the head of the SBO for all universities located in Tehran. This put Zakani in a pivotal role in leading the regime's [brutal crackdown](#) against university protests in 1999, in which the SBO raided dormitories, murdered students, and even committed acts of [torture](#) across Tehran. For these actions, which Zakani directed, the SBO was widely sanctioned for gross human rights violations. Zakani, like [others](#) involved in these crackdowns, was promoted for his loyalty to regime directives. In 2000, his involvement in cracking down on political dissent was rewarded, as he was [promoted](#) as commander of the SBO's national leadership. This gave him a key role in the [Islamization](#) of Iranian universities, the harsh imposition of increasingly stringent morality laws, and the expansion of Basij indoctrination and recruitment activities.

Having remained academically involved during this process, Zakani [earned](#) his doctorate in nuclear medicine in 2004 and became an adjunct [faculty member](#) at TUMS, allowing him to

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remain involved in the Professor's Basij Organization (PBO). Like the SBO, the PBO is an IRGC militia [tasked](#) with repressing dissent on university campuses, purging ideologically insufficient academics, and monitoring student behavior. Like other elements of the Basij, the PBO had a critical role in suppressing protests – especially during those taking place following the 2009 presidential election. Importantly, Zakani's membership in the PBO was another important link with Ahmadinejad, a [fellow member](#) of the militia. Nevertheless, after earning his doctorate, Zakani's ambitions were shifting beyond the Basij and his academic career. So, he jumped into the regime's hardline political movement.

## Hardline Politics

When Zakani became politically involved in 2004, the hardline and conservative factions within the regime were in a relatively marginal position. [So-called](#) moderates and reformists had won overwhelmingly with the 2001 presidential election with the re-election of Mohammad Khatami. In response, hardline forces [formed](#) the Islamic Iran Developers' Coalition (IIDC), who sought to unify opposition to Khatami and portray reformists as straying from the principles of the Islamic Revolution. During the 2004 parliamentary elections, Zakani entered the political arena as an IIDC candidate.

Despite representing the IIDC, Zakani [focused](#) his 2004 campaign on anti-corruption, ideological clarity, and his service in the Iran-Iraq War. This proved to be a winning combination, as he secured a seat in parliament along with other conservatives and hardliners. While in parliament, he supported Ahmadinejad's ascension to the presidency and took a strong [stance](#) on bringing public institutions into alignment with the regime's ideological framework, particularly universities. In 2008, his stature rose as he co-founded a party under the IIDC umbrella, known as the Society of Path-Seekers of the Islamic Revolution. One of the other co-founders, Faridodin Haddad-Adel, is a relative of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei by marriage – bringing Zakani more closely into his orbit.

Notably, it was during this time that Zakani began to [break](#) from his ally, Ahmadinejad, primarily by criticizing his cabinet appointees. As the relationship between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei's circle transformed from [friction](#) in 2009 to outright [confrontation](#) in the final years of the president's second term, Zakani distanced himself fully. In 2013, he even [claimed](#) publicly that Ahmadinejad had requested his assistance in a 2006 plot to dismantle the office of the supreme leader, further pushing the president out of Khamenei's favor. Through this process, Zakani demonstrated where his loyalty lies. In return for his deference, Khamenei [intervened](#) in parliamentary politics to assure that Zakani would rise to further prominence.

With his profile expanding and perhaps sensing Khamenei's support, Zakani [mounted](#) a presidential campaign in 2013, particularly in order to expand the power of the hardliners over other conservatives he perceived as ideologically insufficient – such as [Ali Larijani](#). However, the

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Guardian Council did not allow him to be a candidate. After the so-called reformists were able to mount a united front, Hassan Rouhani was elected overwhelmingly.

After Rouhani's election, Zakani positioned himself as a key opposition leader in parliament. He [attacked](#) the president for seeking to appoint individuals affiliated with Mir Hossein Mousavi, whose rigged electoral defeat in 2009 prompted widespread protests. He also [supported](#) the IRGC's rapidly expanding control over foreign policymaking, particularly their support for proxies in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. Zakani was also [appointed](#) to chair the JCPOA review committee, a position through which he articulated hardline dissatisfaction and the perception that the regime was being forced to make undue concessions. His split from other conservatives, including Larijani, was [deepened](#) by the parliament's ultimate decision to ratify the agreement. Ultimately his fractious handling of the review process turned many of the regime's power brokers against Rouhani and those who approved the JCPOA, toward more hardline figures.

In opposing the JCPOA, Zakani increasingly [aligned](#) himself with Khamenei and the IRGC, publicly supporting them in their [escalating tensions](#) with the president. This prompted many to [speculate](#) that he could mount a presidential candidacy in the 2017 elections. Though he initially [registered](#) as a candidate, he [withdrew](#) from the race to support Raisi as part of an orchestrated effort to consolidate the hardline faction.

After Raisi's loss to Rouhani, Zakani continued his attacks on the president, [accusing](#) him of corruption and economic [mismanagement](#). The following year, he emerged as a key critic of Rouhani's efforts to salvage the JCPOA after the United States withdrew, [claiming](#) that the Islamic Republic was offering too many concessions. He further [argued](#) that the regime should not enter further negotiations without pre-emptive sanctions relief from the United States.

Throughout his early [tenure](#) in parliament, Zakani also sought to hone his anti-corruption bona fides, through chairing an anti-corruption campaign, his role on the economic committee, and by drawing public attention to the issue. Ironically, his own corruption would complicate his political career, not least by delaying his presidential ambitions.

## Reputation for Corruption

In 2020, Zakani's reputation corruption began to develop. In that year's parliamentary elections, intra-party conflict over constituencies caused him to register his [candidacy](#) in Qom instead of Tehran as part of a backroom bargain. This brought criticism, especially because he [demonstrated](#) limited knowledge about the needs of his new constituency. Shortly thereafter, Zakani was [convicted](#) of "political crime" of "spreading lies" by a Tehran prosecutor, for attacks he made against the intelligence ministry.

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Though it was initially [anticipated](#) that Zakani would be selected as speaker of the parliament after the 2020 elections, these issues led to him being [appointed](#) to a lower level role as the head of the Majlis Research Center. Shortly after his appointment, Zakani's issues [worsened](#), as his academic record came under scrutiny, he was attacked for funding his daughters' business ventures and education through public funds, and rumors [circulated](#) that he once engaged in "temporary marriage."

In 2021, perhaps due to his worsening public standing, Zakani [withdrew](#) his presidential candidacy before the election and once again supported Raisi. Shortly after Raisi won through unprecedented [electoral engineering](#), Zakani was selected by the Tehran City Council to serve as mayor following highly rigged local elections, which saw IRGC-affiliates occupy more than [two-thirds](#) of Tehran City Council. According to [leaked audio recordings](#), the appointment of Zakani was marred by threats, legal manipulation, and [other issues](#).

Zakani's tenure as mayor has been marked by continued corruption scandals. This includes a \$336 million [gap](#) in the city budget, [scrutiny](#) over his marital status, and issues regarding embezzlement. However, corruption has provided Zakani with the opportunity to enhance his relationship with the IRGC. According to [reports](#), funds from the city budget have been used to support IRGC business ventures such as YAS Holding or to finance Quds Force activities in recent years. Zakani has [suppressed](#) investigations into further corruption, and has likely continued to [funnel](#) funds to the paramilitary's interests.

Crucially, serving as mayor has allowed Zakani to further demonstrate his loyalty to Khamenei. In response to the protests that erupted in 2022 after the murder of Mahsa Amini, Zakani spearheaded the [implementation](#) of the [Noor Plan](#), a program of violently enforcing compliance with morality laws – particularly the mandatory hijab. He also gave IRGC-led security forces a [free hand](#) in torturing, maiming, and murdering protestors – much as he had directed in 1999. Through this process, Zakani revealed that in spite of his growing reputation for corruption, he remains a ruthless regime hardliner who is blindly obedient to the directives of Khamenei and the IRGC.

## Conclusion

After the unexpected death of Ebrahim Raisi, Zakani moved to announce his presidential candidacy. It remains to be seen if he will be elevated as Khamenei's chosen candidate, but this appears unlikely due to his [continued](#) corruption scandals, weak ties to the IRGC relative to other candidates, and previous difficulties with mounting presidential campaigns. For Khamenei and the IRGC, Zakani's personality traits, known for his brash and thuggish attitudes, may be too much of a concerning reminder of the uncontrollable former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose hunger for power ended up overshadowing his blind commitment to the supreme leader. That said, Zakani remains in complete ideological alignment with Khamenei,

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which the supreme leader values immensely as he seeks to “[purify](#)” the regime as part of his “Second Phase” in the Islamic Revolution. It is possible that Zakani could be running much as he did in 2021, to throw his weight behind the regime’s chosen candidate during the late stages of the campaign and consolidate the hardline vote. Nevertheless, Zakani is [jockeying](#) for the title of “continuity candidate” with other individuals in the race.