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The Pragmatist Who Came In From the Cold: Ali Larijani, Iran's New  
Supreme National Security Council Secretary

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## About the Author

Ali Alfoneh is a senior fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute. He is a political scientist by training and the originator of the theory of transformation of the Islamic Republic into a military dictatorship. Alfoneh first put forward the theory in the spring 2006 edition of *Udenrigs*, journal of The Danish Foreign Policy Society. In the United States since 2007, Alfoneh advanced the theory in a series of essays published by the American Enterprise Institute culminating in *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards are Transforming Iran from Theocracy into Military Dictatorship* published by AEI Press in April 2013. He is also the author of *Political Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Demise of the Clergy and the Rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (2020).

Alfoneh also created AGSI's Iran Media Review, a twice-weekly publication that monitors, translates, and reviews critical Persian-language media sources identifying important developments and trends in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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## Executive Summary

On August 5, President Masoud Pezeshkian appointed Ali Larijani secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, a role he previously held from 2005-07. This time, he returns to an institutionally altered system and a strategically transformed landscape.

With Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei aging, under threat of assassination, and largely withdrawn from day-to-day command, strategic decisions increasingly emerge from a de facto collective leadership composed of the heads of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches alongside representatives of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the army. Regionally, Israel's September 17, 2024 electronic attacks that neutralized Hezbollah's networks, the collapse of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and the exposure of Iranian missile and drone vulnerabilities during the June conflict between Israel and Iran have eroded two pillars of Tehran's deterrence – proxies and missiles – leaving the nuclear program the principal remaining lever to restore balance. Domestically, the state braces for renewed unrest driven by electricity shortages, water scarcity, sanctions, and inflation.

An Iraqi-born native of Najaf but an unmistakably Iranian nationalist, Larijani is expected to leverage his record of bureaucratic competence and global fluency to coordinate Iran's security bureaucracy. Yet strategic coherence is far from assured. As with his predecessors, entrenched factionalism, institutional rivalries, and Khamenei's habit of nurturing parallel command structures are likely to constrain his room for maneuver and complicate interagency discipline. A calculating hard-liner, with equal measures of opportunism, pragmatism, and Iranian nationalism shaping his political decision making, he is likely to be a wily operator. While these traits may prove woefully inadequate in allowing him to effectively steer Iran's national security establishment at perhaps its most critical moment since the revolution, he also seems the best talent this regime could identify from its thinning bench.

## Introduction

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, aging and under threat of assassination by Israel,<sup>1</sup> has physically withdrawn from Iran's chain of command. And with the regime anticipating renewed anti-government protests over electricity outages, water shortages, biting economic sanctions, and rising prices,<sup>2</sup> Tehran is increasingly turning to pragmatists for guidance. Strategic decision making has shifted toward a de facto collective leadership composed of the heads of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, alongside representatives from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Islamic Republic of Iran Army.<sup>3</sup> The latest addition to the group is Ali Ardeshir Larijani, who served as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council from August 2005 to October 2007 and was reappointed to the post by President

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<sup>1</sup> Stav Levaton and Ben Sales, "Katz Says Israel Sought to Kill Khamenei, But Didn't Find an Opportunity," *The Times of Israel*, June 27, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Ali-Reza Soltani, "Rokoud dar Sayeh-ye Enqebaz-e Siyasi va Eqtesadi" [Stagnation in the Shadow of Political and Economic Contraction], *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, August 17, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "Iran: Emergence of Collective Leadership Amid Low-Intensity Conflict," *Arab Gulf States Institute*, July 16, 2025.

Masoud Pezeshkian on August 5, 2025 to oversee and coordinate interagency decision making.<sup>4</sup> On August 7, Khamenei appointed Larijani his representative to the council,<sup>5</sup> formally reversing the Larijani clan's political decline since 2019.

Who is Ali Larijani, how have his past experiences shaped his worldview and conduct, and in what ways might his return influence Iran's national security decision making in an institutionally evolved and strategically transformed environment?

Persian-language media sources generally portray Larijani as an effective bureaucrat and pragmatist who, early in his career, was willing to sacrifice principles for advancement by aligning himself with the most powerful patron to safeguard his and his family's fortunes. But over time, and through bitter experiences, he learned to stand by his convictions – a quality that makes him a valuable addition to the regime's de facto collective leadership. Yet, like his predecessors, he is likely to face the same structural constraints inherent to the office – constraints rendered more perilous by the multiple crises currently engulfing the regime.

## The Iraq Connection

Larijani was born in 1957 in Najaf, Iraq, where his father, Mirza Hashem Amoli, originally from Larijan in Iran's Mazandaran province, had been studying at the city's renowned Shia seminary since 1931.<sup>6</sup> While the family's initial presence in Najaf was likely driven by academic pursuits, their prolonged stay may have reflected a deep concern over the militant secularism of Reza Shah Pahlavi, founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, particularly his policies in the 1930s, including the 1936 decree mandating the forced unveiling of women in public.<sup>7</sup>

The Larijani family, which, in addition to Ali and his parents, included his brothers Mohammad Javad, Sadegh, Bagher, and Fazel, as well as his sister Fazeleh,<sup>8</sup> may have felt at home in the socially conservative Najaf. However, following the 1958 coup that overthrew the Iraqi monarchy, the new regime in Baghdad adopted pan-Arabism as its official ideology, an orientation that entailed a hostile stance toward both Iran and the Iranian community in Iraq. Amid the increasingly anti-Iranian atmosphere, the family relocated in 1961 to the holy city of Qom in Iran, years ahead of a broader exodus of up to 650,000 Iranians who had been residing in Iraq and were later accused of serving as a fifth column for Iran and deported during the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> In Iran, they became known as "*moavedin*" ("the returnees"). They preserved

<sup>4</sup> "Entesab-e Doktor Ali Larijani be Semat-e Dabir-e Showra-ye Ali-ye Amniat-e Melli / Qadr-Dani az Khadamat-e Arzandeh va Khalesaneh-ye Dr. Ahmadian" [Appointment of Doctor Ali Larijani as Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council / Appreciation of the Valuable and Sincere Services of Dr. Ahmadian], *Paygah-e Ettela-e-Resani-ye Riasat-e Jomhouri*, August 5, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> "Entesab-e Aqa-ye Larijani be Namayandegi-ye Rahbari dar Showra-ye Ali-ye Amniat-e Melli va Aqayan Ahmadian va Shamkhani be Namayandegi-ye Rahbari dar Showra-ye Defae" [Appointment of Mr. Larijani as Representative of the Leader to the Supreme National Security Council and Messrs. Ahmadian and Shamkhani as Representatives of the Leader to the Defense Council], *Daftar-e Hefz va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Ayatollah al-Ozma Khamenei*, August 7, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> "Zendeginameh-ye Ali Larijani" [Biography of Ali Larijani], *Jamaran News*, accessed August 22, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Zeynab Ahmadvand, "Nogarayee-ye Reza Shah va Eqdamat-e Ayatollah Esfahani" [Reza Shah's Modernism and Ayatollah Esfahani's Initiatives], *Moassessh-ye Motaleat va Pazhouhesh-ha-ye Siyasi*, October 23, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> "Hame-Chiz dar Bareh-ye Larijani-ha" [Everything About the Larijanis], *Tabnak News Agency*, August 18, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Zahra Ebrahimi, "Eraq-e Jadid dar Masir-e Iran" [The New Iraq in Line With Iran], *Hamshahri Online*, October 23, 2006.

their Iraqi Iranian dual identity, remained fluent in both Persian and Arabic, maintained the informal social networks formed during their years in Iraq, supported one another in business and government, and gradually emerged as a discreet but influential lobby.

## Secular Education, Apolitical Stance

While Mirza Hashem Amoli, Ali Larijani's father, rose to the rank of ayatollah and became a source of emulation, Ali did not follow a clerical path. His education remained largely secular, beginning at Adib Elementary School and continuing at Sadr High School. A gifted student, he passed the national university entrance exam in 1975 and was admitted to Aryamehr University of Technology to study computer science.<sup>10</sup>

Modeled on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Aryamehr University was established to educate bright middle-class Iranians into the elite ranks of the Pahlavi regime.<sup>11</sup>

However, unwilling and unable to pair modernization with democratization, the regime alienated large segments of the very class it sought to cultivate, turning the university into a hotbed of revolutionary ferment. This gave rise to student radicalism with ideological orientations ranging from nationalism, Marxism, and Islamism to anarchism, and, at times, a syncretic blend of all four.

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Ali's brother Mohammad Javad Larijani, an electronics engineering graduate from Aryamehr University and University of California, Berkeley, claims to have been involved in some low-level student activism.<sup>12</sup> However, Ali Larijani himself seemingly remained detached from the radical student politics of the time.

## Married Into the Revolution

Politics entered Larijani's life not through activism but through marriage, almost certainly arranged by his family. In 1977, the 20-year-old Larijani married Farideh Motahari, daughter of Morteza Motahari,<sup>13</sup> a clerical follower of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Motahari, likely with the acquiescence or encouragement of the prerevolution intelligence service SAVAK, which at the time perceived Marxism as a greater threat to the Pahlavi regime than political

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<sup>10</sup> "Zendeginameh-ye Ali Larijani" [Biography of Ali Larijani], *Jamaran News*, accessed August 22, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Habib Lajevardi, *Khatirat-i Muhammad Ali Mujtahidi: Rais-e Dabiristan-i Alburz (1323-1357) va Muassis-i Danishgah-i Sanati-i Aryamihir (Sharif)(1344)* [Memoir of Mohammad Mojtahedi, Dean of Alborz College (1944-1979) and Founder of the Aryamehr Institute of Technology (Sharif)(1965)] (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> "Towzihat-e Javad-e Larijani Darbareh-ye Maqam-e Engilisi dar Sal-e 76" [Javad Larijani's Explanation of His Meeting With a British Official in 1997], *Tarikh-e Irani*, December 22, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> "Dar Mored-e Ali Larijani dar Fararu Bishtar Bekhanid" [Read More About Ali Larijani on Fararu], *Fararu*, accessed August 22, 2025.

Islam, used his post as a professor in the Department of Theology and Islamic Culture at Tehran University to wage ideological warfare against Marxism by shaping the minds of his students.

After earning a bachelor's degree in computer science in 1978, Larijani intended to pursue graduate studies in the same field. However, he was persuaded by his father-in-law to shift his focus to Western philosophy – more specifically, the works of Immanuel Kant. Larijani's academic pursuits were soon interrupted by the implosion of the Pahlavi regime and the victory of the revolution in February 1979. Upon returning to Tehran from exile in Iraq and France, Khomeini appointed Motahari chairman of the Council of the Revolution,<sup>14</sup> a parallel institution designed to constrain the liberal Cabinet of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan. The dual structures established by Khomeini and his clerical allies ran deep, and Motahari soon arranged for Ali and Mohammad Javad Larijani to be placed in mid-level leadership positions at the strategically important Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting,<sup>15</sup> ensuring control over the organization's staff through trusted appointments.

## No Guardsman by Temperament

Motahari was assassinated by the radical Islamist Forghan group in May 1979, but, by then, Ali Larijani's political trajectory was already set. Around that time, most "returnees" from Iraq were gradually coalescing around the cleric Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, himself a returnee. And, following the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980, owing to their Arabic proficiency, they were quickly absorbed into Iran's security and intelligence services. In 1982, nearly two years after the Iraqi invasion, Ali Larijani joined the IRGC.<sup>16</sup> Mohammad Javad, on the other hand, served as advisor to then-Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati and took part in Iran's wartime diplomacy.<sup>17</sup>

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in the IRGC's multivolume Iran-Iraq War chronology.<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Iranian television in July, Larijani stated that he served at the now defunct Ministry of the IRGC and later at the IRGC joint staff headquarters rather than on the front lines.<sup>19</sup> When asked by the journalist if he was "a guardsman by temperament," his response was telling: "It was a duty. The first generation of the revolution could not afford the luxury of serving in a capacity for which they

<sup>14</sup> "Ravand-e Tashkil-e Showra-ye Enqelab" [The Process of Establishment of the Council of the Revolution], *Moassesseh-ye Motaleat va Pazhouhesh-ha-ye Siyasi*, December 21, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> "Kameltarin Biografi az Ali Larijani va Hamsar va Farzandanash, Dabir-e Showra-ye Ali-ye Amniat-e Melli" [The Most Complete Biography of Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani, His Wife and Children], *Saed News*, July 23, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> "Zendeginameh-ye Ali Larijani" [Biography of Ali Larijani], *Jamaran News*, accessed August 22, 2025.

<sup>17</sup> "Mosahebeh ba Doktor Mohammad-Javad Larijani, Moshaver-e Mohtaram-e Vezarat-e Omour Kharajeh" [Interview With Doctor Mohammad-Javad Larijani, Honorable Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs], *Tarbiat*, May 1990.

<sup>18</sup> *Rouzshomar-e Jang-i Iran va Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], eds. Hadi Nokhi and Hossein Yekta (Tehran: Markaz-e Motaleat va Tahqiqat-e Jang-e Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami, 1996–2025).

<sup>19</sup> "Bebinid: Savabeq-e Ali Larijani dar Daheh-ye Haftad az Zaban-e Khodash" [Watch: Ali Larijani's Track Record in the 1980s in His Own Words], *Jamaran News*, July 23, 2025.

were qualified. Everyone was trying to contribute wherever they could.” After the war’s end in 1989, he was promoted to brigadier general and appointed deputy chief of the IRGC joint staff, a position he held until 1992.

Larijani’s tenure at the IRGC joint staff was as unremarkable as the rest of his military career. He never commanded the respect of his peers. Yet the position afforded him personal access to President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani,<sup>20</sup> the dominant figure of revolutionary and post-Iran-Iraq War Iran, whose power at the time even eclipsed that of Khamenei, who, with Rafsanjani’s backing, had succeeded Khomeini as supreme leader in 1989.

## Shifting Allegiance From Rafsanjani to Khamenei

Rafsanjani must have recognized Larijani’s political talent, and when then-Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Khatami, under pressure from Islamist hard-liners, resigned from the Cabinet in May 1992, Rafsanjani invited Larijani to take over Khatami’s portfolio.<sup>21</sup>

As the son of a source of emulation and as an IRGC officer, albeit an unremarkable one, Larijani’s nomination met no parliamentary opposition.<sup>22</sup> Trained in computer science and philosophy, he put both disciplines to effective use in the Cabinet. A technophile, Larijani opposed the regime’s ban on video recording equipment.<sup>23</sup> Bored by IRIB’s programming, affluent Iranians and, increasingly, the middle class were watching illegally copied prerevolutionary Iranian films or the latest productions from Hollywood and Bollywood, often circulated by informal video clubs. Knowing he could not secure regime backing for reforming Iranian television, Larijani, rather than sharing the Islamists’ moral panic over video, legalized video recording equipment and established official rental outlets to promote Hollywood and Bollywood films that were banned from cinemas and state television but not deemed excessively morally or politically subversive.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, he pragmatically endorsed a technology he knew was beyond suppression.

Larijani’s tenure as a cabinet minister did not last long, with his career taking a pivotal turn, notable for its impact and exceptional in the paucity of information about it. It is not known how Khamenei gained an interest in Larijani, but, on February 13, 1994, the supreme leader appointed him director of IRIB,<sup>25</sup> a position that, in the days of the Iranian state’s monopoly on television, was arguably more important than minister of culture and Islamic guidance.

<sup>20</sup> Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Sazandegi va Shokoufae: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1370 Hashemi Rafsanjani* [Construction and Blossoming: Hashemi Rafsanjani’s Record and Memoirs 1991-92], ed. Emad Hashemi (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2014), 62.

<sup>21</sup> Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Rownaq-e Sazandegi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1371* [Prosperity Through Construction: Hashemi Rafsanjani’s Record and Memoirs 1992-93], ed. Hassan Lahouti (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2015), 159–160.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 252.

<sup>23</sup> Ali Larijani, “Khaterat-e 10-Saleh-ye Doktor Ali Larijani” [Decennial Memoirs of Dr. Ali Larijani], *Jam-e Jam Online*, August 22, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> “Entesab-e Doktor Ali Larijani be Riyasat-e Sazeman-e Seda va Sima” [The Appointment of Doctor Ali Larijani to the Directorship of the Voice and Vision Organization], *Daftar-e Hefz va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Ayatollah al-Ozma Khamenei*, January 21, 1994.

Furthermore, in his capacity as IRIB director, Larijani gained access to the meetings of the SNSC, the top interagency body that formulates Iran's national security and defense policy and coordinates the work of civilian and military institutions. On December 22, 1995, Khamenei consolidated Larijani's position by appointing him the supreme leader's representative to the SNSC.<sup>26</sup>

Both appointments represented slight political twists: As IRIB director, Larijani was replacing Mohammad Hashemi Rafsanjani, the president's brother, who had served in that position for 13 years. In the SNSC, Larijani was meant to counterbalance then-SNSC Secretary Hassan Rouhani, another Rafsanjani acolyte. Khamenei's move most likely served two purposes: reining in Rafsanjani's power, network, and economic liberalization agenda, which Khamenei feared would serve as an opening for economic elites independent from the state who would threaten clerical rule, and creating a wedge between Rafsanjani and Larijani.

In his diary, which he systematically published in the daily newspaper *Jam-e Jam* throughout his tenure as IRIB director, and parts of which are available online in censored form, Larijani disclosed that the Rafsanjanis were not slow to express their displeasure with being sidelined.<sup>27</sup> Politically, Larijani aligned more closely with the Rafsanjanis than Khamenei, but, prioritizing career over principles, he ultimately sided with the supreme leader and accepted the position as IRIB director, effectively the regime's chief cultural engineer.

Nevertheless, as Rafsanjani's 1994-97 journals reveal, it was to Rafsanjani that Larijani would turn for support. While a beneficiary of the power struggle between Khamenei and Rafsanjani, Larijani met with Rafsanjani and duplicitously professed "concern over the public's perceived conflict" between the supreme leader and the president.<sup>28</sup> He also solicited Rafsanjani's support for funding to launch satellite television broadcasts to Europe<sup>29</sup> and his political backing to reform Iranian television to attract more viewers – reforms fiercely opposed by commissars from Khamenei's office and the Intelligence Ministry<sup>30</sup> and culture conservatives who staged sit-ins outside the television headquarters to protest the display of anything they deemed an affront to Islam, including musical instruments on screen.<sup>31</sup> While Rafsanjani

<sup>26</sup> "Entesab-e Namayandegan-e Vali-ye Faqih dar Showra-ye Ali-ye Amniat-e Melli" [The Appointment of the Representatives of the Guardian Jurist to the Supreme National Security Council], *Daftar-e Hefz va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Ayatollah al-Ozma Khamenei*, December 22, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Ali Larijani, "Khaterat-e 10-Saleh-ye Doktor Ali Larijani" [Decennial Memoirs of Dr. Ali Larijani], *Jam-e Jam*, September 22, 2004, quoted in "Narahati-ye Mohammad Hashemi az Ali Larijani" [Mohammad Hashemi's Displeasure With Ali Larijani], *Mashregh News*, July 23, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Sardar-e Sazandegi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1375 Hashemi Rafsanjani* [Commander of Reconstruction: Hashemi Rafsanjani's Record and Memoirs 1996-97] (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2018) 214.

<sup>29</sup> Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Mard-e Bohran-ha: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1374 Hashemi Rafsanjani* [The Man of Crises: Hashemi Rafsanjani's Record and Memoirs 1995-96], ed. Leyli Hashemi (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2018), 346.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>31</sup> Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Sabr va Pirouzi: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1373 Hashemi Rafsanjani* [Patience and Victory: Hashemi Rafsanjani's Record and Memoirs 1994-95], ed. Emad Hashemi (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2017), 51.

supported Larijani's initiatives insofar as they served his own interests, his diary entries reveal an amused contempt for the protégé, who seemed to have shifted allegiance to a new patron in Khamenei.

## Sabotaging Khatami and His Reform Agenda

As Rafsanjani's second term ended, and with his bid to bypass the constitution to secure a third consecutive term faltering,<sup>32</sup> the Larijanis invested their political capital in then-Parliamentary Speaker Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, Khamenei's preferred candidate in the 1997 presidential election and the regime's favorite in the face of Khatami and his reformist backers.

To this end, the Larijani-led IRIB indirectly supported Nateq Nouri – a move that the candidate later regarded as one of the reasons for his electoral defeat, since many Iranians “voted for Khatami out of defiance toward the IRIB.”<sup>33</sup> Mohammad Javad Larijani, at the time both a parliamentarian and founding director of the parliamentary research center, was also engaged in a stealth campaign against Khatami. Curiously, he took part in a meeting in London with Nicholas Walker Brown, soon to be appointed the United Kingdom's ambassador to Iran. According to leaks from the meeting cited in Rafsanjani's journal, the Iranian parliamentarian sought to convince the British that a Nateq Nouri victory would “secure Britain and the West's interests,”<sup>34</sup> while preposterously portraying reformist presidential candidate Khatami and his supporters as “the main current trying to act upon the fatwa to kill Salman Rushdie,” whose book, “The Satanic Verses,” had provoked Khomeini's ire in 1989. Other sources added that Mohammad Javad further portrayed the reformists as former U.S. Embassy hostage takers,<sup>35</sup> a claim not entirely inaccurate, as many leading reformists, including Khatami's brother, Mohammad Reza, had indeed participated in the seizure of the U.S. Embassy and diplomats in 1979.

It is unclear whether Mohammad Javad's meeting was a rogue initiative or conducted on Khamenei's behalf, but, in either case, one of them must have deemed the British capable of influencing the outcome of Iran's presidential election and therefore worth courting. Regardless, once the meeting and substance of the discussion were leaked by reformist newspaper Salam, the affair quickly became a scandal, reviving 19th-century Iranian conspiracy theories about “the hidden British hand” in Iranian politics.

<sup>32</sup> “Che Kasani be Donbal-e Madam al-Omr Kardan-e Dowlat-e Hashemi Boudand?” [Who Tried to Make Hashemi President for Life?], *SNN*, June 22, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> “Mousavi Lari: ‘Nateq-Nouri Migoft Hemayat-e Seda va Sima az Man Yeki az Avamel-e Shekastam Boud’” [Mousavi Lari: ‘Nateq-Nouri Used to Say The Voice and Vision's Endorsement of Me Was One of the Elements Behind My Defeat’], *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, February 19, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Enteqal-e Qodrat: Karnameh va Khaterat-e Sal-e 1398 Hashemi Rafsanjani* [Transition of Power: Hashemi Rafsanjani's Record and Memoirs 1997-98], ed. Mohsen Hashemi Rafsanjani (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Maaref-e Enqelab, 2019), 229.

<sup>35</sup> “Tozihat-e Javad Larijani Darbareh-ye Didar ba Maqam-e Engilisi dar Sal-e 76” [Javad Larijani's Explanations Concerning Meeting With a British Official in 1997], *Aftab News*, December 22, 2013.

The incident, coupled with persistent rumors of Khamenei and IRIB's backing for Nateq Nouri, mobilized the Iranian public critical of the regime and helped catapult Khatami to the presidency, securing him 20 million votes to Nateq Nouri's 7 million. The affair also irreparably damaged the career of Mohammad Javad and to a lesser extent the other Larijani brothers, who have since been widely perceived as agents for the British.

With Khatami in office and the reformists challenging the supreme leader's authority, Khamenei feared the emergence of "dual power,"<sup>36</sup> a Leninist term he would later use to characterize the period, and appeared to view the prospect of political liberalization with the same apprehension he had once reserved for Rafsanjani's economic liberalization agenda. Before long, Khamenei had Ali Larijani, Shahroudi (who he had appointed chief justice),<sup>37</sup> the IRGC and its allied Basij militia, and thuggish "pressure groups" to counterbalance Khatami.

Larijani, in his capacity as IRIB director, continued sabotaging Khatami's policies, and, in response, Khatami barred him from attending Cabinet meetings. These developments set the stage for what would become the most controversial chapter of Larijani's political career: the screening of "Identity" on Iranian state television in 1996, which featured coerced confessions from imprisoned Iranian intellectuals, academics, journalists, and reformist political activists, who were accused of serving as agents of Western cultural infiltration. The documentary included confessions from the celebrated poet and essayist Ali Akbar Saidi Sirjani, who died in November 1994 under mysterious circumstances while incarcerated at an Intelligence Ministry safehouse in Tehran. Iranian media reports later revealed that Sirjani had been among the victims of the "chain murders of Iran," a series of more than 80 assassinations of Iranian intellectuals carried out by rogue elements of the Intelligence Ministry between 1988 and 1998, which the ministry publicly admitted to in January 1999.<sup>38</sup>

According to Ahmad Pournajati, a former Intelligence Ministry official who served as one of Larijani's deputies at IRIB, the documentary was an Intelligence Ministry project, but Larijani pushed for its broadcast.<sup>39</sup> Rafsanjani, on the other hand, refused to take responsibility and suggested Hossein Shariatmadari, editor of hard-line Kayhan, should be asked "who ordered him to produce" the documentary.<sup>40</sup>

The documentary served two functions: It was a propaganda tool to erode public trust in Khatami and the reformist movement and a soft form of intimidation meant to deter dissent. Its impact was amplified by the reformists' inability to respond effectively on state-controlled media, leaving Khatami's Cabinet on the defensive while reinforcing Larijani's role as a willing

<sup>36</sup> "Bayanat dar Didar-e Mardom-e Ostan-e Hamedan" [Statements Upon Meeting the People of Hamadan Province], *Daftar-e Hefz va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Ayatollah al-Ozma Khamenei*, June 21, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> "Entesab-e Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi be Riasat-e Qoveh-ye Qazaeiyeh" [The Appointment of Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi to Chief Justice], *Daftar-e Hefz va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Ayatollah al-Ozma Khamenei*, July 23, 1999.

<sup>38</sup> "Ettelaiyeh Vezarat-e Ettelaat Piramoun-e Qatl-ha-ye Mashkuk-e Akhir" [The Intelligence Ministry's Statement Concerning Suspicious Recent Murders], *Islamic Republic News Agency*, December 22, 1998.

<sup>39</sup> "Ahmad Pournajati: Barnameh-ye Hoviyat ba Esrar-e Larijani Pakhsh Shod" [Ahmad Pournajati: The Hoviyat Program Was Broadcast Due to Larijani's Insistence], *Asr-e Iran*, January 13, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> "Nazar-e Hashemi Rafsanjani Darbareh-ye Barnameh-ye Hoviyat" [Hashemi Rafsanjani's View Regarding the Hoviyat Program], *Khabar Online*, May 22, 2011.

executor of Khamenei's cultural counteroffensive. At the time, Larijani defended "Identity" and escalated the controversy by accusing its critics of being "in the pay of foreign embassies."<sup>41</sup> Later, however, he distanced himself from the documentary, claiming it had been produced by his "underlings," and issued an apology to its victims.<sup>42</sup>

## Dismissing Nuclear Deal as "Trading Pearls for Bonbons"

In his capacity as Khamenei's representative to the SNSC, Larijani performed as expected as a counterbalance against Rouhani, still the SNSC secretary, and, indirectly, former president Rafsanjani, who still wielded considerable indirect influence over strategic decision making, chiefly Iran's nuclear program.

Since the Pahlavi regime, the U.S. intelligence community suspected Iran's civilian nuclear program of serving as a cover for Iran's drive for a nuclear weapon. In August 2002, the Mujahedeen-e Khalq organization, likely with satellite imagery it had received from Israeli intelligence, disclosed the existence of a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy-water production plant at Arak. These revelations were later confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency and exposed a covert program that Iran had not declared to international inspectors.

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*Larijani was always a political animal, driven by grasping of opportunity and calculations of political advantage and leverage.*

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The Khatami government, through active diplomacy by Rouhani, managed to defuse the crisis over Iran's nuclear program, resulting in the 2003 Tehran declaration pledging cooperation with the IAEA, temporary suspension of uranium enrichment, and an agreement to sign an additional protocol for verification of nuclear safeguards.<sup>43</sup> At the time, Larijani criticized the deal as Khatami and Rouhani "trading pearls for bonbons."<sup>44</sup> In reality, Larijani may not have had serious objections to the substance of the agreement and politically and philosophically agreed with the pragmatism behind Khatami and Rouhani's cooperative approach. However, once again prioritizing career over principles, Larijani opposed it to ingratiate himself with Khamenei. Put another way, Larijani was always a political animal, driven by grasping of opportunity and calculations of political advantage and leverage.

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<sup>41</sup> "Barkhi Fekr Mikonand Ke Ma Khabar Nadarim az Kodam Sefaratkhaneh Poul va Sefaresh-e Negaresh-e Maqaleh Migirand" [There Are Those Who Think We Don't Know Which Embassy Pays Them or Commissions Articles From Them], *Sobh*, November 1996, quoted in "Ali Larijani: Pakhsh-e Barnameh-ye Hoviyat Kar-e Zirdastanam Boud, Mipaziram Eshtebah Boud" [Ali Larijani: Broadcasting the Hoviyat Program Was the Work of My Underlings, I Accept It Was a Mistake], *Fanoos Zagros*, May 21, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Hassan Rouhani, *Amniat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh-i* [National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy] (Tehran: Majma Tashkhis-e Maslehat-e Nezam, Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Estratezhik, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Shahrard Esna-Ashari, "Payamad-ha-ye Kenarehgeri-ye Larijani az Showra-ye Ali Amniat Melli" [Consequences of Ali Larijani's Resignation From the Supreme National Security Council], *Gozarash*, November 2007.

## Ousted From the SNSC

By the 2005 presidential election, Khamenei had grown wary of independent-minded presidents pursuing politically risky economic and political reforms and sought to reassert control. Rafsanjani entered the race and so did Larijani, but Khamenei backed Tehran's mayor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a populist with antiestablishment credentials. Khamenei clearly viewed Ahmadinejad as a useful instrument for a Maoist-style cultural revolution aimed at purging the regime of his rivals. What Khamenei failed to anticipate, however, was that Ahmadinejad's antiestablishment, and even anticlerical, attacks went beyond Rafsanjani, Khatami, and the Larijani brothers, whom he derided as "the aristocracy of the Islamic Republic," and would eventually extend to challenging Khamenei himself.

With Ahmadinejad in office, Khamenei imposed Ali Larijani on him as SNSC secretary.<sup>45</sup> From the outset, the two men were on a collision course. Defining himself as the antithesis of his predecessor, Khatami, and with Khamenei's backing, Ahmadinejad quickly hardened Iran's position regarding its right to pursue the full nuclear fuel cycle "for peaceful purposes." The posture was likely shaped by President George W. Bush's mounting difficulties in Iraq, which in Tehran's view lowered the risk of U.S. military action against Iran's nuclear program. Ahmadinejad also soon discovered that declaring Iran's commitment to Israel's destruction earned him notoriety, if not fame, in the international media. He pursued this course with little regard for the diplomatic isolation and deepened pariah status it imposed on Iran.

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*Larijani also understood how Israel exploited Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, which lent credibility to its claims that the Iranian president's statements revealed the true purpose of Iran's nuclear program.*

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Larijani likely shared the analysis that, with the United States bogged down in Iraq, Iran could take greater strides in its nuclear program, and he had also been an outspoken critic of Khatami's nuclear diplomacy and his predecessor in the SNSC, Rouhani. However, once in office, he soon recognized the merits of Rouhani's approach: combining gradual development of Iran's nuclear program with cooperation with the IAEA and active diplomacy to divide the Western allies, lessen the threat of Iran's diplomatic isolation, the risk of its nuclear file being referred to the United Nations Security Council, and, ultimately, war with the United States.<sup>46</sup> Larijani also understood how Israel exploited Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, which lent credibility to its claims that the Iranian president's statements revealed the true purpose of Iran's nuclear program.

To shield the regime from Ahmadinejad's excesses, Larijani pursued constructive dialogue with the European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, seeking to ease tensions with the West through cooperation with the IAEA and to forestall the referral of Iran's nuclear file to the Security Council. In a May 22, 2013 interview with Iranian television, Larijani explained to what lengths he went to befriend Solana at the time and persuade him of the "differences

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<sup>45</sup> "Entesab-e Dabir-e Showra-ye Ali Amniat-e Melli" [Appointment of the Supreme National Security Council Secretary], *Dolat-e 9-10*, July 23, 2005.

<sup>46</sup> Hassan Rouhani, *Amniat-e Melli va Diplomasi-ye Hasteh-i* [National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy] (Tehran: Majma Tashkhis-e Maslehat-e Nezam, Markaz-e Tahqiqat-e Estratezhik, 2011), 662.

between us and the Taliban” regime of Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup> His diplomatic efforts impressed Solana as well as U.K. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who praised him in his memoir “The Last Man Standing,”<sup>48</sup> though both noted that domestic political constraints prevented Larijani from delivering substantive results.

However, Ahmadinejad systematically undermined Larijani’s efforts. In early August 2005, shortly after Ahmadinejad took office, Iran announced its decision to remove IAEA seals from the Isfahan uranium conversion facility and later that month resumed uranium conversion activities there. Ahmadinejad repeatedly asserted that the Cabinet – meaning himself – was in charge of nuclear negotiations, publicly disparaging “those who negotiate from a position of fear and trepidation” and ridiculing unnamed figures who “loiter around negotiating on the side.”<sup>49</sup>

Larijani attempted to shield the regime from international sanctions but failed to prevent the adoption of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1696, passed on July 31, 2006, which demanded Iran suspend uranium enrichment. Commenting on the episode, Mohammad Javad Zarif, then Iran’s permanent representative to the U.N., observed: “Until the very night U.N. Security Council 1696 was issued, Mr. Larijani thought Russia and China would veto it.”<sup>50</sup> Yet not only did Russia and China refrain from using their vetoes, they also joined in supporting the subsequent five U.N. Security Council resolutions against Iran.

Ultimately, under the barrage of Security Council resolutions and under pressure from Ahmadinejad, Larijani submitted his resignation as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council October 20, 2007. Ahmadinejad accepted the resignation without prior consultation with Khamenei, who later signaled displeasure with the way the affair was handled.

Larijani’s resignation marked the first instance in which he sacrificed his career for the sake of principle. Explaining his motives, Larijani said in the May 2013 interview: “I felt that I had a serious managerial disagreement with Mr. Ahmadinejad. I believe that the country’s strategic issues must be pursued in a calculated manner and require convergence among all different sectors of the country. Instantaneous, ad-hoc actions cannot be effective and will only create problems for the country.” He added: “For a while, I tolerated it, and we would argue, but after some time I realized that, after all, he is the president and has the right” to act as he sees fit, “and there was no need for me to interfere or be an obstacle. I did not want to have an imposed presence.”<sup>51</sup>

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47 “Dalayel-e Kenarehgi-ye Larijani az Showra-ye Amniat: Ba Ahmadinejad Ekhtelaf-e Jeddi Dashtam” [The Reasons Behind Larijani’s Resignation From the Security Council: I Had a Serious Conflict With Ahmadinejad], *Hamshahri Online*, May 22, 2013.

48 Jack Straw, *Last Man Standing: Memoirs of a Political Survivor* (London: Macmillan, 2012).

49 “Saeed Jalili be Ja-ye Ali Larijani” [Saeed Jalili Replacing Ali Larijani], *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, October 21, 2007.

50 “Mamouri-ye Gheir-Momken-e Ali Larijani” [Ali Larijani’s Mission Impossible], *Fararu*, July 23, 2025.

51 “Dalayel-e Kenarehgi-ye Larijani az Showra-ye Amniat: Ba Ahmadinejad Ekhtelaf-e Jeddi Dashtam” [The Reasons Behind Larijani’s Resignation From the Security Council: I Had a Serious Conflict With Ahmadinejad], *Hamshahri Online*, May 22, 2013.

At the SNSC, Larijani was replaced by Saeed Jalili, an IRGC war veteran, who infamously started his first round of negotiations with Solana by declaring everything his predecessor and the EU had agreed upon null and void.

## The Larijanis in Control of Two Branches of Government

In an extraordinary turn of events, the Larijanis converted the SNSC debacle into a political triumph that secured Ali Larijani the speakership of parliament from June 2008 to March 2019 and elevated his younger brother Sadegh to chief justice from August 2009 to May 2020 – a position he inherited from his mentor Shahroudi. As chief justice, Sadegh prosecuted – on Khamenei’s behalf – reformist politicians aligned with Mir Hussein Moussavi, Mehdi Karroubi, and what later came to be known as the “Green Movement.”<sup>52</sup> For the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, two brothers, both foreign born, simultaneously presided over two branches of government for more than a decade. Even more extraordinary, following Shahroudi’s death from cancer in December 2018, Sadegh was rumored to be a possible successor to Khamenei.

Ali Larijani entered the Parliament as a representative of Qom and quickly secured the speakership with considerable help from his brother-in-law, parliamentarian Ali Motahari, winning 237 of 260 votes. Larijani’s success can also be ascribed to support from Khamenei, who by that time had more accurately counted the mounting diplomatic costs of Ahmadinejad’s schemes and sought to counterbalance him. Larijani’s astonishingly rapid political recovery after his resignation as SNSC secretary also raises the possibility that even in prioritizing principle over politics, he was assessing his adversary’s power and influence, discerning overreach and a waning of Ahmadinejad’s influence significantly before other rivals.

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Larijani turned the legislature into a political counterweight to Ahmadinejad’s increasingly erratic and confrontational presidency: He used parliamentary oversight powers to challenge budgetary allocations, question foreign policy adventurism, and block or dilute executive initiatives deemed harmful to the regime’s long-term stability. At critical moments, such as disputes over subsidy reforms or Ahmadinejad’s dismissal of key ministers (in particular the crisis over Ahmadinejad’s dismissal of the minister of intelligence), Larijani aligned the Parliament with his brother Sadegh in the Judiciary and elements of the IRGC leadership to limit presidential autonomy. This parliamentary activism suited Khamenei’s strategy of containing Ahmadinejad’s personal power without an overt public rupture while enhancing Larijani’s reputation as a pragmatic conservative capable of balancing ideological loyalty with institutional restraint.

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<sup>52</sup> “Naqdi bar Amalkar-e Ayatollah Larijani dar Qoveh-ye Qazaeiyeh” [A Critical Account of Ayatollah Larijani’s Track Record at the Judiciary], *Ensaf News*, February 20, 2019.

Larijani's long tenure as parliamentary speaker also overlapped with the Rouhani presidency and the parliamentary review of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Rouhani's signature diplomatic achievement. On October 13, 2015, when deliberations on ratifying the JCPOA were scheduled to begin, Larijani, as speaker, violated parliamentary procedure by denying both supporters and opponents the chance to debate the agreement. Later that day, in another breach of protocol, he blocked deputies from presenting proposals regarding the details of the deal, contravening prior understandings among parliamentarians. Instead, he forced the JCPOA to a swift vote, pushing it through in a perfunctory 20-minute review that amounted to little more than symbolic approval.

Clearly, Khamenei had already sanctioned the JCPOA, and Larijani was unwilling to allow less-informed parliamentarians, or Rouhani's factional rivals eager to oppose the agreement, to undermine the supreme leader's agenda. But apart from doing Khamenei's bidding, Larijani also resisted the temptation of aligning with the hard-liners against his political rivals, Rouhani and Zarif.

## Exiled Into the Cold

In another tumultuous turn of events for the Larijanis, Sadegh was abruptly moved by Khamenei from his post as Iran's chief justice to the comparatively marginal chairmanship of the Expediency Council in December 2018. Even more striking, the Guardian Council, of which Sadegh himself was a member, went on to disqualify Ali Larijani after he registered as a candidate for the May 2021 presidential election.

Ali Larijani sought to downplay the episode, insisting he had entered the race merely "out of duty" and declaring that he was "content with God's will." Sadegh, by contrast, was less restrained. In a since-deleted post on Twitter (now known as X), he openly criticized the disqualification of his brother, writing: "I have never found the decisions of the council less defensible than now, both with regard to qualifications and disqualification of presidential candidates."<sup>53</sup> On August 23, 2021, Sadegh resigned from his seat on the Guardian Council in protest,<sup>54</sup> but the Larijanis found little sympathy from the public, who asked why he had remained silent during earlier episodes of blatantly unjust disqualifications and only protested when his brother's career was at stake. Ali Larijani's brother-in-law, Motahari, was similarly outspoken, revealing that the disqualification was linked to the fact that Ali Larijani's daughter, Fatemeh, resided in the United States, though he noted that the foreign residency of close relatives does not, in itself, constitute a legal barrier to candidacy.

<sup>53</sup> "Amoli Larijani: Tasmimat-e Showra-ye Negahban Gheir-e Qabel-e Defae Ast" [The Guardian Council's Decisions Are Not Defensible], *Deutsche Welle*, May 22, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> "Majara-ye Estefa-ye Amoli Larijani va Bardasht-ha-ye Nadorost az Hokm-e Rahbari. Ayandeh-ye Siyasi-ye Baradaran-e Larijani Chist?" [An Account of Amoli Larijani's Resignation and Incorrect Interpretations of the Leader's Decree. What Is the Political Future of the Larijani Brothers?], *Khabar Online*, September 8, 2021.

Larijani pressed the Guardian Council for a formal explanation, and, on December 18, 2021, images of the council's classified letter surfaced online.<sup>55</sup> The letter cited his alleged responsibility for dysfunction in Rouhani's administration, his failure to maintain simplicity of lifestyle, his family members' frequent foreign travel (including trips to Europe and the United States), and the foreign residency or study of several of his close relatives. Larijani responded to the allegations in a 21-page letter, which he also released online,<sup>56</sup> but it failed to sway the Guardian Council. On May 31, 2024, Larijani again registered as a presidential candidate only to be disqualified once more. He said the Guardian Council had told him he was "neither managerial nor sagacious" as grounds for his disqualification.<sup>57</sup>

According to the London-based Amwaj Media, which claims unique access to government sources in Iran, Larijani's candidacy was further undermined by Hossein Taeb, then director of the IRGC Intelligence Organization, who favored Ebrahim Raisi.<sup>58</sup> Separately, a clerical source in Qom told Amwaj that an Ali Larijani presidency could have bolstered Sadegh's chances of succeeding Khamenei as supreme leader – another reason why Larijani was barred from running.

The Guardian Council's rejection of Larijani, despite his decades of service, was both a personal humiliation and clear reflection of Khamenei's preferences: Just as Khamenei had maneuvered Ahmadinejad into the presidency in 2005, in 2021 he wanted Raisi. By sidelining Larijani in favor of Raisi, Khamenei not only ensured there would be no splitting of the conservative vote but also that the presidency would remain in the hands of a loyalist without an independent political base. It could therefore be seen as part of a broader purge of centrist-conservative pragmatists from the state's upper echelons. Mohammad Javad's marginalization, Sadegh's demotion, and Ali's disqualification together underscored the near-total eclipse of the Larijani family's once-formidable influence, marking a period of political exile in which Ali Larijani's prospects seemed permanently diminished.

## Coming In From the Cold Amid Disastrous Strategic Challenges

Against all odds, Larijani returned to a position of supreme political influence, first gradually and then suddenly. On June 4, 2021, after his disqualification from the presidential election, Khamenei offered him only tepid backing, using the closing portion of a televised address to criticize the Guardian Council's disqualification of "certain candidates."<sup>59</sup> He referred to the

<sup>55</sup> "Nameh-ye Mahramaneh-ye Showra-ye Negahban Bara-ye Dalael-e Radd-e-Salahiat-e Ali Larijani + Aks" [The Guardian Council's Classified Letter Concerning the Reasons for Disqualification of Ali Larijani + photo], *Gostaresh News*, November 22, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> "Dalael-e Radd-e-Salahiat-e Ali Larijani Moshakhas Shod" [The Reasons Behind Ali Larijani's Disqualification Are Clarified], *Didban-e Iran*, December 18, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> "Larijani: Motalaqan Pishnahadi Bara-ye Hozour dar Dowlat Nadashtam" [Larijani: I Absolutely Did Not Receive Any Offer to Be Present in the Cabinet], *Khabar Online*, October 22, 2024.

<sup>58</sup> "Ekhtesasi: 'Dalael-e Vaqei-ye' Radd-e-Salahiat-e Larijani az Etebar Saqet Shodeh-Boud" [Exclusive: 'The Real Reasons' Behind Larijani's Disqualification Were No Longer Valid], *Amwaj Media*, June 11, 2024.

<sup>59</sup> "Sokhanrani-ye Televizioni be Monasebat-e Si va Dovomin Salgard-e Rehlat-e Emam Khomeini" [Televised Address on the Occasion of the Thirty-Second Anniversary of the Passing of Imam Khomeini], *Daftar-e Hefz va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Ayatollah al-Ozma Khamenei*, June 4, 2021.

“injustice done to some of those who were disqualified” and to the “accusations made against them and their family members.” These accusations, Khamenei acknowledged, “turned out to be incorrect but were widely spread on the internet.”

What brought Larijani back into the political arena were the escalating clashes between Iran and Israel that culminated in the disastrous 12-day conflict in June. The cycle began 14 months earlier, on April 1, 2024, when Israel struck the Iranian Consulate in Damascus, killing several IRGC Quds Force officers. Lacking the technical means for a proportionate response, Iran retaliated with drone and ballistic missile salvos, the vast majority of which were intercepted by Israel's multilayered air defense system and its allies. Restrained by then-President Joseph R. Biden Jr., on April 19, 2024, Israel limited its response to targets in and around Isfahan, including a radar system protecting the Natanz nuclear site and other air defense installations.

The Israeli leadership, convinced of the demonstrable superiority of its air defense systems, counting on continued U.S. support, and assured of the limits to the efficacy of Iran's missiles, escalated the crisis with targeted assassinations. In July 2024, Israel killed top Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukur and an Iranian military advisor in Beirut, and, more spectacularly, Israel killed Hamas political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh and his bodyguard in Tehran as Haniyeh attended the inauguration of Iran's new president. Despite Khamenei's vows of revenge, Tehran did not retaliate, and, perhaps emboldened by Iran's inaction, Israel, in September 2024, disabled Hezbollah's infrastructure and communications and incapacitated some 1,500 fighters through electronic device attacks. This was followed by a ground invasion of southern Lebanon and the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut.

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Iran's direct missile and drone response in early October 2024 proved no more effective than its initial strikes in April, with most of its missiles intercepted. Israel responded October 26 with a sweeping air campaign across Iran, destroying much of the country's long-range air defense network, including Russian-supplied S-300 batteries and associated detection radars, further exposing Iran's strategic vulnerabilities.

With Hezbollah as well as Iran's air defense systems out of the equation, an Israeli attack appeared imminent, yet then-SNSC Secretary Brigadier General Ali Akbar Ahmadian, who had succeeded Admiral Ali Shamkhani in May 2023, seemed out of his depth. Larijani, on the other hand, was busy giving major interviews to Iranian media on strategic issues, which he would not have done without encouragement from higher up. On October 22, 2024, for example, he gave a major interview to Khabar Online, in which he implicitly criticized the late and sanctified Raisi for not reviving the JCPOA. Referring to his private conversation with the late president, Larijani disclosed: “One time, I told him that solving the JCPOA issue is not the

same thing as solving the problem of scarcity of onions or potatoes in the market. Whoever wants to solve the issue will end up getting soiled. We must accept that we will be cursed a good deal, when we want to solve such a problem for the sake of the people.”<sup>60</sup>

Larijani was even blunter in his assessment of the U.S. sanctions and what Iran could expect from Russia and China: “We cannot rely on Russia ... to reduce the pressure from the sanctions. The Russians themselves are in trouble ... the same applies to the Shanghai Group or BRICS ... when we discuss economic agreements with them, they do take U.S. sanctions into consideration.” Turning to the position of the Arab states, Larijani said: “Some Arab states, who are usually critical of us ... are now concerned about Israel. They argue that when Israel is done with us, the Israelis will bother someone else ... Israel has demonstrated that it wants to establish hegemony in the region. If it manages to do so, nobody can breathe freely. This certainly is to the detriment of the region and us.”

In November 2024, Larijani reemerged as Khamenei’s special envoy, meeting embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Lebanese Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri, both missions traditionally within the purview of the SNSC secretary. Upon his return, Khamenei’s website prominently featured a lengthy interview with Larijani reporting on his mission.<sup>61</sup> Yet, for all the praise Larijani lavished on the Syrian regime in that interview, Iranian troops were simultaneously withdrawing from Syria with Russian assistance, and Assad himself fled the country on December 8, 2024, which precipitated the immediate collapse of his regime. IRGC analyst Mehdi Kharatian likened the moment to the fall of the Berlin Wall, warning that Iran could face a fate similar to that of the Soviet Union.<sup>62</sup>

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With Iran deprived of two of its three pillars of security – proxies and missiles – and denied access to Syrian territory following the collapse of the Assad regime, Khamenei and the Iranian leadership were left with only one remaining instrument of national power: the nuclear program. The question now was whether Iran should cast aside prudence and dash for a nuclear weapon to reestablish a “balance of terror”<sup>63</sup> with Israel or instead pursue negotiations with the United States in search of a diplomatic resolution to the nuclear crisis.

In what was almost certainly a politically sanctioned appearance, Larijani went on IRIB’s “Between the Headlines” on February 1, 2025 and signaled Iran’s willingness to negotiate with the United States. He even cited the number of centrifuges as an issue open for debate

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<sup>60</sup> “Larijani: Motalaqaan Pishnahadi Bara-ye Hozour dar Dowlat Nadashtam” [Larijani: I Absolutely Did Not Receive Any Offer to Be Present in the Cabinet], *Khabar Online*, October 22, 2024.

<sup>61</sup> “Revayat-e Doktor Larijani, Moshaver-e Rahbar-e Enqelab, az Safar-e Akhir be Souriyeh va Lobnan” [Advisor to the Leader of the Revolution Doctor Ali Larijani’s Account of His Recent Visit to Syria and Lebanon], *Daftar-e Hefz va Nashr-e Asar-e Hazrat-e Ayatollah al-Ozma Khamenei*, November 21, 2024.

<sup>62</sup> “Iran va Khavar-e Mianeh Pas Az Soqout-e Assad” [Iran and the Middle East After Assad’s Fall], *Azad*, December 25, 2024.

<sup>63</sup> Albert Wohlstetter, “The Delicate Balance of Terror,” *RAND*, 1958.

and added pointedly that “people must live.” The latter remark appeared to be directed at the Iranian public, signaling that the regime recognized the need to make nuclear concessions in the hope of securing sanctions relief and alleviating economic hardship.<sup>64</sup>

At the time, President Donald J. Trump appeared interested in negotiations with Iran, and, in early March, the U.S. president responded by sending a letter to Khamenei, initiating outreach for a new nuclear agreement, but also warned of force if Iran failed to engage in diplomacy. While rejecting direct talks with the United States, Iran accepted negotiation through intermediaries, and, on March 28, it was once again Larijani, rather than Ahmadian, who publicly conveyed optimism regarding the prospects of reaching a diplomatic settlement with Washington.<sup>65</sup> It was also Larijani who, in an April 1 interview with IRIB, tried to respond to Trump’s threat of the use of force with a combination of flattery and veiled threats: “Mr. Trump is undoubtedly a shrewd individual in his own professional domain, which accounts for his financial success, so he is presumably aware that his rhetoric carries a cost. Nonetheless, the leader has indicated that he does not deem a military confrontation highly probable.”<sup>66</sup>

In the end, Khamenei’s prediction proved wrong. Neither Larijani’s veiled threats nor his flattery deterred Israel’s June 13 assault or the subsequent U.S. bombardment of Iran’s nuclear installations. In a series of preemptive strikes, Israel assassinated senior IRGC commanders and nuclear scientists and targeted radar installations, ballistic missile launchers, nuclear facilities, and air bases – later expanding its campaign to encompass Iran’s military-industrial base and even fuel reserves. By doing so, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched a war he knew Israel could not win alone, wagering instead that he could maneuver the United States into completing the mission. That calculation proved correct: Despite his aversion to entangling the United States in another “forever war,” Trump ultimately authorized strikes on June 22 against Iran’s nuclear facilities, significantly degrading its nuclear infrastructure.

Larijani said he received a warning call from Israeli intelligence operatives to flee Tehran,<sup>67</sup> survived the strikes, and continued his support for negotiations with the United States, despite the U.S. bombing of Iran. But he curiously specified on July 19: “For the Islamic Republic, negotiation is a tactic and not the strategy ... Let the leader use negotiations when needed and not use the negotiation tool if not needed,” and added: “Iran is not in a hurry to negotiate. America waged war against Iran, and it must first explain why it chose war.”<sup>68</sup>

By August 1, Iranian media openly circulated rumors about Larijani’s imminent return to the SNSC, and, most approvingly, Gholam Ali Jafarzadeh Iman Abadi, a former parliamentarian close to Larijani, confirmed the rumors of Larijani’s appointment to the SNSC in an interview with Eqtasad News and called for genuine changes: “We can’t continue as in the past ... It is

<sup>64</sup> “Ali Larijani: Masaleh-ye Hasteh-I Bakhshi az Tavan-e Melli-ye Ma Ast, Amma Hameh-ye Tavan-e Melli-ye Ma Nist; Mardom Bayad Zendegi Konand” [Ali Larijani: The Nuclear Issue Is Just a Fraction of Our National Strength, and Not Our National Strength in Its Entirety; People Must Live], *Entekhab*, January 20, 2025.

<sup>65</sup> “Larijani: Sharayat-e Har Tavafoqi Bayad Mored-e Qaboul-e Do-Taraf Bashed” [Larijani: Conditions of an Agreement Must Be Acceptable by Both Parties], *Tasnim News Agency*, March 28, 2025.

<sup>66</sup> “Ali Larijani: Trump Be Ja-ye Tahdid, Manafe-e Eqtesadi Ba Iran Taarif Konad” [Ali Larijani: Instead of Threatening Iran, Trump Ought to Define His Economic Interests in Iran], *Asr-e Iran*, April 2, 2025.

<sup>67</sup> “Revayat-e Tazeh-ye Larijani Az Tahdidash Tavasot-e Mossad” [Larijani’s New Account of the Mossad Threat Against Him], *Tabn*, August 15, 2025.

<sup>68</sup> Ali Alavi, “Manteq-e Mozakereh-ye Taktiki” [The Logic Behind Tactical Negotiations], *Javan*, June 22, 2025.

necessary to revise the process of utilizing the country's elites, those who have been unjustly sidelined and confined to their homes."<sup>69</sup> The editorial board of Iranian Labour News Agency not only praised Larijani's return but also called for the removal of hard-line Saeed Jalili as Khamenei's representative to the SNSC.<sup>70</sup> Even Javan, the IRGC's primary media outlet, praised Pezeshkian's appointment of Larijani, writing that "It reflects the regime's inclination to prioritize expertise in times of crisis,"<sup>71</sup> and that "He is among the few who can strike a balance in Iran's international relations without succumbing to either emotionalism or excessive conservatism."

## Institutional Challenges

Larijani has assumed the SNSC post at a moment when Iran's national security apparatus is under severe strain. The June conflict with Israel underscored the vulnerabilities in Tehran's intelligence and defense coordination. Meanwhile, U.S. sanctions, domestic unrest, and regional instability demand unified strategic planning, yet the regime's decision making remains fragmented among competing institutions.

Established by a 1989 amendment to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the SNSC is composed of the heads of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government; the chief of staff of the armed forces; the head of the Plan and Budget Organization; two representatives appointed by the supreme leader (one of whom has traditionally been the SNSC secretary); the ministers of foreign affairs, interior, and intelligence as well as any cabinet minister whose portfolio is subjected to debate in the council; and the chief commanders of the IRGC and army. The decisions of the SNSC are effective "after confirmation by the leader."<sup>72</sup>

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Larijani's mandate is to streamline these channels, reconcile operational differences, and present coherent policy options to the supreme leader, and his job may just have gotten more difficult, as, simultaneous with his appointment, the regime also created a Defense Council, the exact functions of which remain unknown. According to Tasnim News Agency, the Defense Council was established as a subsidiary of the SNSC, based on Article 176 of the constitution.<sup>73</sup> The president, or an SNSC member appointed by the president, will preside over the Defense Council, and the secretary of the Defense Council will be "a member of

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<sup>69</sup> "Jafarzadeh: Hokm-e Larijani Bara-ye Dabiri-ye Showra-ye Ali-ye Amniyat be Zoudi Sader Mishavad. Keshvar Niazmand-e Khaneh-Tekani va Tagheer Masir Ast" [Jafarzadeh: Larijani's Decree Appointing Him Supreme National Security Council Secretary Will Soon Be Issued. The Country Is in Need of Decluttering and Change of Course], *Eqtesad News*, August 1, 2025.

<sup>70</sup> "Ba Taghir Dar Sakhtar-ha-ye Amniati Che Entezarati Mitavan Dasht?" [What Can We Expect of the Changes in the Security Agencies?], *ILNA*, August 2, 2025.

<sup>71</sup> "Pishbord-e Ahdaf-e Melli ba 'Maqboul-e Jenah-ha'" [Advancing National Objectives With Someone Acceptable to All Factions], *Javan*, August 6, 2025.

<sup>72</sup> "The Constitution of Iran," *Constitute*, accessed August 25, 2025.

<sup>73</sup> "Showra-ye Defae' Bar Asas-e Kodam Band-e Qanoun-e Asasi va Chera Tashkil Mishavad?" [Why and According to Which Paragraph of the Constitution Is the 'Defense Council' Established?], *Tasnim*, August 2, 2025.

the country's armed forces." Other members include the heads of the three branches of government, two representatives of the supreme leader to the SNSC, the minister of intelligence, the chief of the armed forces general staff, the commander in chief of the IRGC, the commander in chief of the army, and the commander of the Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters.

If the council is headed by an IRGC hard-liner beyond Larijani's influence, it could duplicate or override SNSC functions, creating jurisdictional disputes reminiscent of the dual-power tensions Khamenei once accused the reformists of seeking. Larijani's success will depend on his ability to assert primacy over this new structure while preserving the delicate interagency balance.

Another factor that could complicate Larijani's leadership is his August 30 appointment of Ali Baqeri Kani as his deputy at the SNSC.<sup>74</sup> Baqeri Kani previously served as Jalili's deputy, and where his loyalties now lie remains to be seen.

Disregarding the complications arising from the establishment of the Defense Council, and appointment of Baqeri Kani, Larijani's personal managerial style will also shape his relationship with the different parts of Iran's bureaucracy. Based on his track record, Larijani appears to be a team player and more likely to cooperate with other parts of the bureaucracy than the former SNSC secretary, Shamkhani, who, according to remarks in Zarif's memoir, was in the habit of keeping the institutions, in particular the Foreign Ministry, in the dark.<sup>75</sup> Zarif also complained about how the secretariat of the SNSC, over time, has evolved into an independent power center that tries to impose its will on the bureaucracy. Here, too, Larijani may be more inclined to act as a team player than fight the entire government bureaucracy.

## Conclusion

Larijani's reemergence as SNSC secretary is emblematic of Iran's cyclical reliance on pragmatists during periods of acute stress. His career arc – from cultural policymaker to parliamentary counterweight, presidential hopeful, political exile, and now national security coordinator – mirrors the regime's own oscillation between consolidation and adaptation. Yet his return is no guarantee of strategic coherence: Entrenched factionalism, institutional rivalries, and the supreme leader's habit of cultivating parallel command structures will constrain his room to maneuver. Still, in a political system where personal access, institutional memory, and elite trust are scarce commodities, Larijani brings assets few others can match. Whether he can translate those into tangible policy gains will depend not only on his bureaucratic skill but also on Khamenei and Iran's collective leadership's willingness to grant Larijani the autonomy his predecessors often lacked.

The stakes of his return are unusually high. The June conflict with Israel, precipitated by preemptive Israeli strikes and followed by unprecedented U.S. bombardment of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, demonstrated the hollowness of Tehran's deterrent posture. Its two

<sup>74</sup> "Ali Baqeri az Larijani Hokm Gereft" [Ali Baqeri Received an Appointment From Larijani], *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, August 30, 2025.

<sup>75</sup> Mohammad Javad Zarif, *Payab-e Shakibaei: Bardasht-ha-yi Az Hasht Sal Vezerat* [The Audacity of Resilience: Impressions From Eight Years of Cabinet Service] (Tehran: Entesharat-e Ettelaat, 2024), 132.

main pillars – regional proxies and missile stockpiles – proved inadequate against Israel's evolving military capabilities, while the collapse of the Assad regime deprived Iran of its most strategically valuable forward operating base. What remains as the third pillar is the nuclear program, now both the regime's last card and its most dangerous liability. In this environment, Larijani's appointment to the SNSC embodies Tehran's recognition that survival depends on sophisticated management of both internal divisions and external diplomacy.

Yet Larijani inherits an institutionally fragmented system. The SNSC was designed to coordinate national security policy, but decades of parallel structures have diluted its authority. The recent establishment of a Defense Council, chaired by the president and likely dominated by senior officers, risks creating an overlapping or rival body and so does the appointment of Baqeri Kani.<sup>76</sup> Unless Larijani can assert the SNSC's primacy, Iran may relive the dysfunctions of earlier episodes when dual institutions paralyzed decision making. His challenge, therefore, is not only to craft coherent strategy but also to enforce bureaucratic discipline in a system that thrives on redundancy and rival centers of power.

What makes Larijani uniquely suited for this task is less ideological conviction than accumulated experience. His career demonstrates a consistent pattern: prioritizing survival and access to power over rigid adherence to principle while showing flashes of pragmatism when the regime's long-term viability is at stake. As minister of culture, he legalized video recording equipment to manage a technology he could not suppress. As nuclear negotiator, he pursued constructive dialogue with European officials despite domestic opposition. As parliamentary speaker, he pushed through the JCPOA review in defiance of procedure because he knew the supreme leader had already sanctioned the deal. Even his resignation from the SNSC in 2007, framed as a principled break with Ahmadinejad, underscored his ability to recognize the dangers of reckless adventurism. These moves suggest that, now as SNSC secretary, Larijani is likely to favor pragmatic engagement abroad and restrained conflict management at home, so long as such moves are consistent with the supreme leader's red lines.

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*Larijani's return is less about personal vindication than regime survival.*

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Nevertheless, there are limits to what even a seasoned insider can accomplish. Khamenei may be somewhat marginalized due to Israeli threats, and to some extent replaced by a collective leadership, but entrenched rivalries among clerical, military, and civilian elites, along with interagency rivalry, constrain Larijani's autonomy. The IRGC, in particular, retains veto power over key aspects of national security and foreign policy. Larijani may coordinate, cajole, and balance, but he cannot override hard-line currents without Khamenei and the collective leadership's explicit backing. His own statement in July – that negotiation is a “tactic and not the strategy” – captures this reality. In Iran, even pragmatism must be couched as tactical flexibility rather than strategic transformation.

Ultimately, Larijani's return is less about personal vindication than regime survival. Iran stands at a crossroads, beset by sanctions, unrest, regional setbacks, and the erosion of deterrence. The nuclear program, once a bargaining chip, is now both a shield and target.

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<sup>76</sup> “Ali Baqeri az Larijani Hokm Gereft” [Ali Baqeri Received an Appointment From Larijani], *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, August 30, 2025.

Whether Tehran contemplates dashing for a bomb, with whatever remains of its nuclear program, bargains for relief, or muddles through with calibrated ambiguity will depend not on Larijani alone but on the collective leadership in which he now plays a central role. His presence may inject coherence and pragmatism into policy, but the fundamental dilemmas remain unresolved.

