

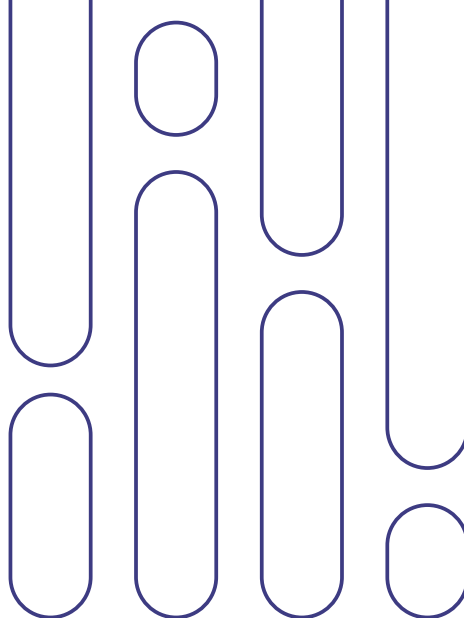
REPORT

Why Did Khamenei Assign Shamkhani to Lead the Negotiations With Saudi Arabia?

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Following the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iran agreement in March 2023, Iran has markedly intensified its diplomatic moves in the region. The interesting point here is that these diplomatic efforts are not led by the Iranian Foreign Ministry nor is it represented, rather, the National Supreme Security Council (SNSC) and its Secretary Ali Shamkhani have taken the lead. This has revived an old debate in the Iranian political arena over the competition between the Foreign Ministry and the SNSC and their roles in the country's foreign policy — in light of the dualism of Iran's political system. In response to this revived debate, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said that these diplomatic efforts, whether those related to the reconciliation with Saudi Arabia or Shamkhani's visits to the UAE and Iraq, were completely coordinated with Shamkhani as they are related to the country's security. Nevertheless, such diplomatic efforts indicate that Shamkhani and the SNSC play a significant role in the country's foreign policy. The question raised here is: what is the reason behind the SNSC and its leader taking a bigger role in the making of Iran's foreign policy?

The Nature and Process of Iranian Decision-making

A host of factors related to the nature of Iran's political system have contributed to the SNSC taking a more significant role in the country's foreign policy:

- **The SNSC plays a prominent role in setting the country's foreign policy:** Since its establishment, the council has been one of the major state institutions that considers the country's foreign policy. Its most significant mission has been the management of Iran's nuclear program since 2003. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei dominates the SNSC, which is in charge

of crafting the country's defense and security policies and responding to internal and external threats. The chairman of the council is the president of the republic, yet the de-facto ruler of the council is the representative of the supreme leader; the council's Secretary Ali Shamkhani.

• **The Foreign Ministry, a tool to execute Iran's foreign policy:** The ministry plays a minor role in defining goals and crafting policies. Its impact largely relies on the personality and influence of the minister who is in charge of managing foreign policy and executing the decisions approved by the supreme leader. However, his role is quite limited in defining policies and strategies. Due to the dual and multilayered power structure of the political system, the Foreign Ministry merely executes the policies determined by the supreme leader and his institutions. This was confirmed by Mohammed Javad [Zarif](#), Iran's foreign minister under the Rouhani government, who said that he had no power in making the decisions related to the country's foreign policy.

• **Problems and contradictions between the foreign policy decision-making institutions:** Zarif's remarks were affirmed by the backlash to his leaked audio in April 2021. In this audio, Zarif criticized the intervention of the IRGC in the country's foreign policy. In response to Zarif's criticism, Supreme Leader Khamenei replied saying that the Foreign Ministry "executes" the policies defined by the SNSC. The latest moves of the SNSC in the context of negotiating and signing the significant agreement with Saudi Arabia reveals that the Foreign Ministry is no longer in charge of foreign policy decision making but also it is not the only executive institution for the country's foreign policy.

- **The performance of the Foreign Ministry depends on the charisma and capabilities of its minister:** In fact, the Iranian Foreign Ministry has seldom initiated a decision in relation to the country's foreign policy. This was witnessed on a few occasions during the time of the "reformist" Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Zarif. The latter was charismatic enough to take the nuclear file from the SNSC and activate the Foreign Ministry's role in foreign policy decision making while marginalizing the SNSC's role. After Raisi's assumption of office, the nuclear file returned to the SNSC, which has played a [larger role](#) in crafting Iran's foreign policy along with the president and Khamenei. The expanding role of the SNSC in foreign policy is apparently related to the "hardliners'" dominance; the council was founded following the 1989 amendments to the Constitution which entrenched the power of the supreme leader, including the crafting of foreign policy. The "hardliners'" dominance over the Parliament and the presidency as well as the exclusion of the "reformists" have all contributed to bringing back the SNSC to the heart of the country's foreign policy decision making.

Current Priorities and Shamkhani's Significance

After ascending to power and forming the government, Raisi adopted a foreign policy program in which he reaffirmed that distrust in the West is a fundamental principle in the country's foreign policy. Later, the regime's leaders reportedly suggested that the country's foreign policy should rely on resisting pressure and not depending on foreigners to tackle crises, thwarting sanctions through entrenching economic diplomacy, relying on internal capabilities, enhancing the "Look to the East policy," particularly toward Asia and Iran's neighbors, resisting US

hegemony and expanding cooperation with Islamic countries. The SNSC contributed significantly to crafting this foreign policy program which is currently executed by the Foreign Ministry.

But as a matter of fact, the Foreign Ministry has exerted little efforts to execute Raisi's program; as a result, domestic crises have exacerbated and international isolation has increased. Serious challenges emerged before the regime, thus drastic changes in the country's foreign policy became necessary — the key source of tension between Iran and the world is its foreign policy. In this context, we can summarize the motivations behind granting the SNSC a leading role as follows:

- **Khamenei's desire to craft a balanced foreign policy to address challenges without holding responsibility:** The current conditions that Iran is experiencing necessitates drastic changes in the country's foreign policy. Such a transformation is not possible without the approval of the supreme leader. To create a consensus for this transformation, the supreme leader needs to choose a reliable institution that directly reports to him to lead this process of transformation. This institution would enhance his legitimacy and at the same time hold responsibility in the case of any failure. He chose the SNSC as the competent institution to carry out this transformation, given the council's power structure and reliable members.

- **Shamkhani's Arab origin and experience in the Saudi-Iran rapprochement :** Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani is an Arab-Iranian, born in Ahwaz city. He enjoys a prominent position within the power structure of the Iranian regime. He was an IRGC commander in the Iran-Iraq War and was the organization's second minister. In addition, he commanded the Artesh navy and was Iran's minister of defense under the Khatami government from

August 1997 to August 2005. His Arabic language and culture will impact the negotiations and help bring views closer to those of the Arab countries. Shamkhani also enjoys extensive experience in handling negotiations; he played a prominent role in the convergence of views between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 1990. The talks resulted in the participation of late King Abdullah Al Saud, the then crown prince in the Eighth Islamic Conference Summit held in Tehran in December 1997. According to some Iranian narratives, Shamkhani played a significant role in the rapprochement and communication with the Saudi delegation back in the 1990s. The rapprochement was effective to an extent as reflected in King Abdullah's visit to the house of Hashemi Rafsanjani. Following the closing of the Islamic Conference Summit, Shamkhani, who was back then Iran's minister of defense, in an unprecedented move, visited Riyadh where he signed a defense agreement and received the Order of Abdulaziz Al Saud, the highest award in the kingdom.

- **Low performance of Iran's Foreign Ministry:** According to Iranian reports, the reason for depending on Shamkhani was Raisi's realization that the negotiating team in the Foreign Ministry was not sufficiently qualified to reach an agreement with Saudi Arabia.

- **The issues in the talks are about security:** The issues discussed in the Iranian talks with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf are mainly about security issues, thus, it was necessary to appoint security officials to negotiate with Saudi Arabia. Shamkhani, the former Artesh and IRGC commander, was the most suitable official to lead the talks.

- **Choosing an official who is accepted by Iran's proxies in the region:** Some Iranian proxies believe that Shamkhani's

longstanding experience in the military and security files and the various positions he has held in the political system makes him the most suitable to have succeeded Qassem Soleimani, especially in handling the Iraqi file.

A Larger Role Played by Shamkhani and Supervised by Khamenei

After his various tours to China, the UAE and Iraq, Shamkhani has become the first man in Iran's diplomatic and political arena. His mission has been mainly to reduce tensions with countries in the region. His new mission has not only drawn attention, but it may also generate several consequences in the context of Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors, according to some observers. Iran views Shamkhani's designation as necessary to shorten the duration of the negotiations and hasten the conclusion of understandings with Arab countries.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry is fully aware that the SNSC and its Secretary Shamkhani are handling — in complete coordination with the ministry — diplomatic missions, which are deemed integral to its duties. This reality is reflective of the fact that the role of the ministry has been diminished and is undervalued. Further, it is possible that the council assigns the foreign minister to carry out missions, i.e., the council directs and orders the minister. This development indicates that the council will play a larger role not only in crafting but also executing the country's foreign policy. Shamkhani became a hot topic of discussion in Iranian politics after he was isolated against the backdrop of the arrest and execution of his advisor Alireza Akbari, who was accused of spying for the UK. However, he, in particular, is likely to play a larger role now in the country's foreign policy. Without

a doubt, after being marginalized for years since assuming his position as the SNSC secretary, Shamkhani has seized the opportunity to prove his worth and to prepare himself again to be an adept diplomat.

It is yet unknown whether the SNSC's duties will expand and include other files such as the nuclear talks or not. In recent years, Iran's foreign policy was scathingly criticized over being led by multiple institutions that contributed to its decision making. Apparently, assigning the diplomatic missions to one institution; the SNSC, will reduce contradictions. Thus, it can be argued that the supreme leader probably granted the SNSC a larger role under his supervision to remove contradictions arising from the regime's duality, which may hinder Iran's apparent eagerness to de-escalate tensions and boost stability.

To conclude, it can be argued that Iran's foreign policy was dominated in the past decade by the IRGC's radical approach, which eventually thwarted all diplomatic efforts aimed at addressing the country's internal and external challenges. The motives of the IRGC's radical approach are based on the organization's belief that there is room to push forward its expansionist project abroad in light of tensions in the region that have deepened since 2011 as well as its assumption that any understanding with the West or countries in the region will curb its economic and political positions. Amid the regime facing an existential crisis, reviving diplomacy away from militarization cannot be achieved without the supreme leader. The Foreign Ministry and Raisi cannot not curb the IRGC without the intervention of the supreme leader and his institutions, including the SNSC. The supreme leader has taken the lead, assigning his institutions and reliable officials to play larger roles to execute

his vision in the context of foreign policy to address the current challenges that the country is facing.

