

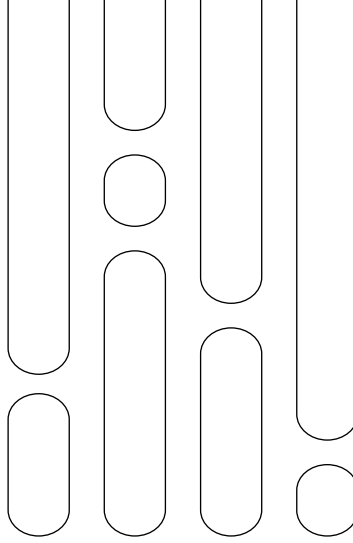
Position Paper

IRAN'S SUPREME NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL AFTER SHAMKHANI'S RESIGNATION: CONTEXT AND REPERCUSSIONS

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Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi issued a decree on May 22, 2023, [whereby](#) he appointed Ali Akbar Ahmadian as the new Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) to succeed Ali Shamkhani. The latter resigned after spending 10 years in office. As has always been the case with former secretaries of the council, Shamkhani has not totally left the Iranian political landscape. Shortly after announcing Shamkhani's resignation, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed him as a member of the Expediency Discernment Council and adviser. The role of the council is considered important in the process of decision-making internally and externally, especially in the context of Iranian national security.

This position paper will look at the factors leading to the resignation, its significations and potential repercussions, both internally and externally.

Significance and Context

The resignation of the Iranian SNSC's secretary surprised everyone. Shamkhani was considered to be a veteran pillar of Iran's decision-making circles and played a major role in outlining Iran's foreign policy, including involvement in the nuclear talks. He was extremely prominent in recent months as he played a key role in signing the rapprochement agreement with Saudi Arabia, resulting in ties being restored between the two sides. This deal offered Iran an opportunity to end its regional isolation and recalibrate its ties with its neighbors. Shamkhani's involvement was indicative of his prominence and influential role in Iran.

SNSC's Significance in Formulating Iranian Foreign Policy

This resignation is of significance given the [prominent role](#) the SNSC plays in crafting Iran's foreign policy. Since its establishment, the council has been among the primary bodies where Iranian foreign policy is discussed. The council's most important mission in 2003 was running Iran's nuclear program. It is worth noting that Khamenei has ultimate authority over the council which is in charge of outlining Iran's security and defense policies and responding to internal and external threats. Despite the fact that the Iranian president is the council's chair, the secretary, who is also the supreme leader's personal representative in the council, is actually responsible for steering its discussions.

Rise of "Hardliners" and Their Impact on the SNSC's Role

The SNSC has become more prominent, specifically since the "hardliners" established control over the country's branches of power, starting from the parliamentary elections in February 2020 and Raisi's presidential election win. The council has recalibrated Iran's foreign policy to cope with the more radical orientations of the "hardliners." The council had its wings clipped by Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, particularly in relation to talks with the West and the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015. The council contributed to placing legislative limitations on the prospects of reviving the nuclear deal after Trump left the White House. Moreover, the council and its Secretary Ali Shamkhani played a role in outlining Iran's foreign policy based on defiance and confrontation — one of its characteristics was to adopt a hardline posture on the nuclear talks in Vienna, and move away from the West to mitigate the impact of sanctions and bypass pressures. This growing and prominent role of the council was at the expense of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

One of the [results](#) of this Iranian foreign policy was the deadlock in the nuclear talks in Vienna, resulting in the reimposition and expansion of sanctions and pressures on Iran by the Biden administration. This pushed Iran to adopt a more bellicose policy, reflected in its involvement alongside Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war and the emphasis on looking eastwards. These postures and policies did not save the political system at home as it faced a new wave of popular protests that erupted because of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions

and human rights abuses, particularly after the killing of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini at a detention facility of Iran's morality police.

The political system has realized that reversing its regional behavior and approach — through reconciliation and normalization of ties with Saudi Arabia — offers it an opportunity to end its regional isolation and thwart the formation of a US and Israel-led regional security body against it. The Shamkhani-led council played a prominent role in reaching the Saudi-Iran deal and its subsequent diplomatic efforts at the regional level indicated that it had strayed into the Foreign Ministry's territory. Shamkhani bypassed Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in these efforts. Iran continues to review its policies toward the region's countries as well as to the rest of its spheres of influence accordingly. The region's countries continue to watch Iran's positions and monitor the limits of change and continuation of its foreign policy. There are forecasts that Iran will be more serious about cooperating in order to achieve stability, and will manage competition for logical and rational reasons given the circumstances besetting the country internally and externally.

Motives for Removing Shamkhani

There are several factors contributing to the Iranian government's decision to end Shamkhani's tenure or push him to submit his resignation, the main ones are the following:

Shamkhani's Affiliations and Positions

Given that Shamkhani was close to the "reformists'" orientations, he always faced criticism from the "hardliners," especially as he had criticized the political system, including the current Raisi government. During the protests that followed the death of Amini in September 2022, Shamkhani criticized the government's crackdown on the protestors. This position led to a lot of pressure on Khamenei, especially to dismiss Shamkhani, as the SNSC had failed to quell the protests. Furthermore, accusations of corruption were leveled against him and his family, although the allegations have not been probed or proven yet.

Differences Over Iran's Regional Trajectory

According to [reports](#), the cause for Shamkhani's dismissal was his disagreements with Raisi; he believed that the SNSC should be in charge of Iran's ties with Arab states. Raisi desired to reestablish his and his ministries' authority over regional matters, which Shamkhani had presided over recently. This disagreement was another example of Shamkhani's brave stances and defiance of Iranian decision-making circles, including the IRGC and the presidency. He called for a change of policies, reflecting a difference of viewpoints on foreign policy issues among key stakeholders. Disagreements appeared clearly in two divergent positions: [Shamkhani's tacit call](#) — at the conclusion of the international forum hosted by Tehran's Supreme National Defense University earlier in May 2023 — on the Iranian leadership to acknowledge the developments on the global stage. He said, "We should make the appropriate changes," warning at the same time that a lack of preparedness and strength would render the country vulnerable in the face of unanticipated difficulties. On the other hand, Ali Bagheri, Tehran's chief negotiator and deputy foreign minister in an [article](#) titled "The Foreign Policy Perspective in Light of the New Global Order," pointed to the shifts in the global order while reiterating Tehran's commitment to its well-established positions on several issues at the regional and global levels. This article was published on the official website of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, which Bagheri wrote one day before Shamkhani's resignation.

Akbari's Case and the Post-Khamenei Era Arrangements

There had been calls in the past to fire Shamkhani. The condemnation of Shamkhani's ally, Alireza Akbari, increased the likelihood of his expulsion and provided his opponents with a

massive opportunity to attack him, including newspapers and websites linked to the IRGC. Furthermore, other sources suggest that the Akbari case was a planned plot to discredit Shamkhani, whose prominent and rising profile was of concern to “conservative” circles. Some blogs relate that Shamkhani planned to run in the next presidential election.

As the political system prepares for Khamenei’s imminent succession, which could occur at any time, the supreme leader dislikes conflict among the country’s institutions and elites. This orientation has been in place since the supreme leader launched the so-called “second stage of the revolution,” which relies on supplying the various state institutions with young cadres to reinforce the revolutionary line and keep the government in power for as long as possible. It is worth mentioning that Rouhani appointed Shamkhani to his post, a position of supreme state authority.

Concern About Shamkhani’s Ambitions

Perhaps the Iranian deep state was concerned about Shamkhani’s rise to prominence, which increased the prospect of “moderates” and “reformists” [nominating](#) him in the next presidential race, so disrupting the imminent post-Khamenei transition process. Another theory is that the political establishment perceived Shamkhani as being overly zealous about reestablishing relationships with neighboring states. This was reflected in the “conservatives” outrage over Shamkhani’s role in ending the diplomatic rupture with Saudi Arabia and facilitating Iran-Arab relations, which put further pressure on Raisi to fire him.

Ali Akbar Ahmadian’s Strengths

The new SNSC secretary has credentials and a record that make him more favorable to the “hardliners” over Shamkhani. According to [Fars News Agency](#), Ahmadian was born in 1961 in the city of Kerman. He is from the revolution’s second generation. His appointment is compatible with the plan of the supreme leader and the president to achieve the so-called “second stage of the revolution.” He is considered among the commanders who is obedient to the political system’s line since he was among the commanders who was close to former Quds Force Chief Qassem Soleimani. They served together in the 41st Tharallah Division. In addition, Ahmadian possesses extensive experience of working in decision-making institutions and holds significant qualifications and has made notable contributions in this field. He left his studies at the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Tehran once the Iran-Iraq War started and joined the battle lines. In the final years of the war, Ahmadian became one of the architects of transforming the IRGC Navy and established himself as an asymmetric defense theorist. Furthermore, during Ahmadian’s stint as deputy and commander of the IRGC Navy, the concept of asymmetric defense was fully operationalized. His 15-year tenure in the IRGC Navy established him as a specialist in navigation and missiles. After leaving the IRGC Navy in 2000, Ahmadian was appointed as the IRGC Chief of Joint Staff. During his seven-year term, he initiated significant transformations in the administrative structure and organizational capabilities of the IRGC. He rose to prominence as one of the most eminent Iranian experts on national security issues.

He graduated from the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Tehran after the Iran-Iraq War. He also graduated from the Supreme National Defense University with a Ph.D. in Strategic Management. He was also the chief of the IRGC Strategic Center for 16 years, beginning in 2007. In September 2022, he was one of five new members appointed to the Expediency Discernment Council by Khamenei. Thus, Ahmadian has a track record of serving the political system and has earned the trust of the supreme leader and Iran’s de facto governing institutions.

Internal and External Repercussions of Removing Shamkhani

Given the nature of the council's tasks and the roles assigned to Shamkhani throughout his political career, including internal and external missions, his resignation and replacement will have internal and external repercussions, such as the following:

Internal Repercussions

The replacement of Shamkhani is more of a dismissal than a resignation and his appointment to the Expediency Discernment Council and as an adviser to the supreme leader is nothing but an appeasement gesture. This is evidenced by the Iranian poet Mohtasham Kashani's verse that was posted by Shamkhani on his Twitter account. The verse reads, "The words that were being uttered in secret, were overtly uttered...at the end, insinuations were allowed, so leave."

His dismissal reflects the "hardliners'" desire to control all decision-making institutions and the appointment of more ideologically-driven officials to key decision-making posts. Ahmadian is close to the "conservative" camp unlike Shamkhani, who is considered by some as one of Rouhani's stalwarts. The dismissal also indicates the pattern of the dispute at this stage between the different parties of the Iranian political process. The "conservatives" are waging a battle and they believe that there should be no room for the opposition to have any share in power. This is indicative of their efforts to undermine any opportunities for the "reformists" to advance in the next parliamentary or presidential elections as was the case in the 2020 parliamentary election and the 2021 presidential election.

Shamkhani's dismissal indicates that the Foreign Ministry could now play a bigger role in making and implementing foreign policy decisions after a period of domination by the SNSC and its secretary. Shamkhani played major roles, subsequently appropriating the role of the Foreign Ministry. The incoming SNSC chief lacks diplomatic expertise, hence he will have to cooperate with the Foreign Ministry.

As for Shamkhani, his future career and role will depend on the political steps that he will take. If he prefers being appointed to state positions, he will remain behind closed doors within state apparatuses that are run by Khamenei in a way that serves the interests of the political system in line with internal and external developments. But if he prefers being elected to Parliament or presidential office, according to some analysts, this step will take the level of competition to another stage, with Shamkhani expected to side with the "reformists" as previously mentioned.

External Repercussions

In the face of the official silence and ambiguity surrounding Shamkhani's resignation, analysts have mentioned various motivations related to domestic and external considerations. Regardless of which motivations are more accurate, there will certainly be some repercussions on Iran's foreign policy given the significance of the SNSC secretary's role in the country's political and security decision-making. It is also worth noting that the removal of Shamkhani after his success in concluding the Saudi-Iran deal to restore diplomatic ties has raised many questions about the extent to which the two events (the Saudi-Iran deal and Shamkhani's dismissal) are correlated. However, Shamkhani's removal was a discussion point even before the signing of the rapprochement deal with Saudi Arabia, when his name became synonymous with the case of Akbari in 2019. The latter was accused of obtaining top-secret intelligence from Shamkhani and divulging it to Britain; he was executed on this charge. Moreover, the ruling establishment was not happy with Shamkhani's criticism of the Iranian government. It is likely that Shamkhani's marginalization will continue until he is totally removed from the scene; i.e., he will not be assigned to a major diplomatic mission then pushed toward resignation.

In the context of Shamkhani's departure, his replacement indicates that the most hardline elements within the political system in relation to Iran's regional policy have a strong hand and have succeeded in imposing their view and removing Shamkhani from his post. This development could impede Iran's trajectory toward normalizing its ties with the region's countries, particularly with Saudi Arabia and contribute to the government reconsidering its regional policy. There is a camp that still believes that Iran has paid a huge price for its regional project and clout and that the process of openness and normalization of relations pose a threat to the country's regional standing. On the other hand, another camp believes that Shamkhani's success in thawing relations with Arab states has intensified internal pressures on the political system to pursue a foreign policy that is also open to the West and the United States. Replacing Shamkhani reflects a desire to prevent the latter camp from advancing, and a need to suppress this alternative view since it goes against the well-established principles of Iran's foreign policy. This is indicated in Bagheri's article which was posted on the Foreign Ministry's website.

In regard to the most important foreign policy issue, the nuclear talks, while both Iran and the United States cling to the talks as a means to revive the nuclear deal, removing Shamkhani — who was placed on the US sanctions list in 2020 during Trump's tenure — from office could pave the way for changing Iran's approach toward the nuclear talks, however, this approach is unlikely to contradict the government's normalization of relations with the region's countries as normalization, will strengthen Iran's regional standing and curb the international pressures on it.

However, there is an alternative view which holds that Iran may not abandon its new regional orientations of normalizing ties with Saudi Arabia and cooperating to advance regional peace and stability. According to this view, the removal of Shamkhani, who spearheaded the signing of the rapprochement deal with Saudi Arabia and the normalization of ties, will not significantly impact Iran's position, given that this new Iranian orientation is blessed by the supreme leader rather than the president. This newly implemented orientation is vital for Iran, which it must not reverse. Given these divergent analyses, it could be said that there is a possibility of striking a balance between the path of normalizing ties and preserving regional clout and the links that Iran has worked hard to develop and maintain over four decades.

Conclusion

Perhaps the political establishment is embarking on a path of building domestic consensus on foreign policy after the structural dichotomies displayed by the dispute among the apparatuses of power, particularly among the ones connected to the supreme leader and those overseen by the president. This consensus could delay the implementation of the Saudi-Iran deal's terms on normalizing relations and advancing regional stability. In general, Iran's foreign policy developments in the coming period and the extent of their compliance with the Saudi-Iran deal will be a litmus test for the Iranian ruling system and its institutions. The continuation of de-escalation and the settling of differences will indicate whether or not the institutional frameworks (state institutions) have the upper hand over the decision-making process in Iran. There could then be greater efforts to further enhance building ties and normalization. Conversely, in case of the resumption of past practices, this will provide clear proof that the Iranian political establishment will continue to remain adherent to the revolutionary ideological vision that prevents the strengthening of amicable relations with its immediate neighbors as well as with global powers.



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