

Changes in Iran's Supreme National Security Council: Systemic Overhaul or Cosmetic Adjustment?

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In early August, Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) announced the establishment of the "Defense Council," which will operate under Iran's president and will be composed of the heads of the three branches of government, representatives of the supreme leader, and senior military officials. Just as this was announced, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei appointed Ali Larijani as secretary of the SNSC and as his representative to this Council. These organizational changes underscore Tehran's ongoing effort to draw lessons and recalibrate its security doctrine, force buildup, and operational posture in the aftermath of the 12-day war with Israel. This process, still in its early stages, is taking place parallel to an internal debate between pragmatic and hardline factions in Iran over the war's implications and the policy direction that should be taken in its wake. Regardless of which side will win out, it is doubtful whether the recent changes will provide the Iranian leadership with the tools needed to address the mounting domestic and external challenges it faces, without far-reaching shifts in Iranian strategy, significant upgrades to its military capabilities, and extensive institutional reforms.

On August 3, 2025, Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) announced the creation of the "Defense Council," which will operate under the leadership of President Masoud Pezeshkian. It will be composed of the heads of the three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial), two representatives of the supreme leader to the SNSC, the intelligence minister, the chief of staff of the armed forces, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the commander of the regular army, and the commander of the Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters, the emergency military command. The Defense Council will be charged with conducting a centralized review of Iran's defense programs and upgrading the capabilities of its armed forces.

In parallel to the establishment of the new council, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed his adviser and former Majles speaker, Ali Larijani, as secretary of the SNSC and as his representative to the council, replacing Ali Akbar Ahmadian. Larijani is considered one of Iran's veteran politicians. Before serving as Majles (Islamic Consultative Assembly) speaker from 2012–2020, he had previously held the position of Secretary of the SNSC and was in charge of the nuclear negotiations portfolio. In 2007, just two years after being appointed secretary, Larijani resigned due to sharp disagreements with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He was replaced by Saeed Jalili, associated with the hardliner faction and known as one of the harshest critics of the nuclear negotiations conducted under former president Hassan Rouhani and of the nuclear deal reached in 2015.

Larijani is considered a pragmatic conservative who, like many of his peers, acknowledged the need to adapt the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology to prevailing conditions and

contemporary realities. During his tenure as Majles speaker, he supported former president Rouhani's policies, which aroused the ire of the radical factions of the assembly. In the presidential elections of 2021 and 2024, the Guardian Council even dismissed his candidacy. Nevertheless, over the past year, Larijani's involvement in political affairs has grown. At the end of 2024, Ayatollah Khamenei dispatched the former speaker as his special envoy to Lebanon and Syria (before the collapse of Assad's regime), and more recently, he was sent by Khamenei on an official visit to Moscow, where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Larijani's return to the top echelons of government may reflect Khamenei's wish to integrate experienced, veteran politicians into Tehran's decision-making circles. This desire has grown since Iran's war with Israel, particularly in light of Israel's elimination of much of Iran's senior command echelon in its opening strike of the 12-day conflict. Larijani's reinstatement to the SNSC may also serve Khamenei as a conciliatory signal, both domestically and abroad, despite balancing this appointment with the continued presence of hardliner Saeed Jalili as one of his two representatives on the council.

The SNSC, headed by Iran's president, was established in 1989 as part of the constitutional changes introduced after the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and became the highest body for determining national security policy. Article 176 of the Iranian constitution assigns the SNSC authority to set defense and security policy within the framework of the supreme leader's overall directives, ensure coordination of policy, intelligence, social, cultural, and economic domains within a security framework, and mobilize state resources to confront internal and external threats.

In addition to the president, the SNSC is composed of the ministers of foreign affairs, interior, and intelligence; the commanders of the IRGC and the regular army; the heads of the legislative and judicial branches; and two personal representatives of the supreme leader. The SNSC may summon additional participants depending on the issue being discussed, and its decisions are subject to the supreme leader's approval. Given that the ministers of intelligence, interior, and foreign affairs require the president's nomination and the supreme leader's approval, and that the head of the judiciary as well as the senior military-security commanders are appointed directly by the supreme leader, the only senior officials on the council not formally dependent on Khamenei are the president and the speaker of the Majles. The supreme leader also appoints the secretary of the SNSC and designates his own representatives to the council, affording him near-total control over the body, despite the fact that its decisions are formally taken by consensus.

The "Defense Council" may be considered a reincarnation—although different in essence—of the "Supreme Defense Council," which was established after the Islamic Revolution (1979) and was soon charged with managing Iran's national security during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). That council was composed of seven members: the president of Iran (who chaired it), the prime minister (a position abolished in 1989), the minister of defense, the chief of staff, the commander of the IRGC, and two representatives of Khomeini. With the outbreak of the war, its powers were expanded, and it became the supreme coordinating body of all combat operations, including making strategic decisions, allocating resources, and coordinating among the forces. With the end of the war and the establishment of the SNSC, the council was dissolved.

Pragmatic and reformist circles in Iran welcomed Larijani's inclusion in the SNSC, expressing hope that it signaled the beginning of a more conciliatory and moderate phase in the country's foreign policy. This is against the backdrop of the strategic crossroads at which the Islamic Republic finds itself after its war with Israel. Decision-makers in Tehran face a choice between a return to the negotiating table with the United States or further escalation against it and against Israel.

According to moderate circles in Iran, Larijani's diplomatic experience and pragmatic approach will reduce Jalili's influence in the SNSC. This could open the way for a shift in Iran's foreign policy toward a possible renewal of negotiations with the United States and a lowering of tensions with the West. Mahmoud Vaezi, who served as chief of staff to former president Rouhani, noted that Larijani's return would symbolize a change of approach, a policy course correction, and an expression of gratitude by the regime toward a public that had supported it in an unprecedented manner during the war. Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, a former member of the Majles Committee on Foreign Policy and National Security, argued that Larijani's presence in the SNSC conveys to the West that Iran frames its national security within a diplomatic and realist approach. Falahatpisheh also asserted that Larijani's appointment serves to strengthen the political-civilian composition of the council. In recent years, domination by representatives of the armed forces has impaired the SNSC's ability to seize diplomatic opportunities, particularly leading up to the war with Israel in June 2025.

In addition, supporters of the establishment of the Defense Council argue that this step was necessary in light of the war, Iran's growing security challenges, and the possibility of renewed sanctions on Iran if the E3 states (Britain, France, and Germany) activate the "snapback" mechanism restoring UN sanctions. In their view, these challenges require streamlining the decision-making processes in emergency situations and improving preparedness for complex security scenarios. They claim that the establishment of the Defense Council will enable greater managerial centralization and faster, more efficient decision-making in crises, such as a renewed Israeli attack.

Conversely, some circles identified with the hardliners have expressed reservations about the expected moves. They warn that such steps could upset the balance of power at the top of the Iranian leadership and could lead to the adoption of a conciliatory policy toward the West, which, they argue, has already proven a failure in light of the Israeli and American strikes on Iran. According to these critics, the establishment of another council under the SNSC could undermine the authority of other bodies, such as the Majles, and further complicate the decision-making process in a state already characterized by institutional duplication.

Nevertheless, even within the conservative camp, some voices support the establishment of the Defense Council. The hardline news agency SNN has argued that the presence of senior commanders alongside the heads of the three branches of government and the supreme leader's representatives would streamline military decision-making while allowing the SNSC to focus on shaping the overall national security strategy. This strategy would encompass economic, social, political, and international dimensions related to defense and security. Moreover, the existence of a centralized and powerful security body would send a strong message of deterrence to Iran's enemies, signaling that the regime is determined to defend

its sovereignty and national interests and that it possesses the necessary mechanisms to cope with any crisis.

The organizational changes in the SNSC were implemented against the backdrop of Iran's process of drawing lessons from the war with Israel and reassessing its security doctrine, force-building, and operational methods. Repeated Israeli and American declarations of their readiness to strike Iran again have, in Tehran's view, further underscored the need to prepare for potential scenarios of escalation with its adversaries. A recent article on the "Nour News" website, affiliated with former SNSC secretary Ali Shamkhani, stated that the regime must change its strategy and carry out organizational changes in the security establishment. The article emphasized that Iran's threat environment has shifted since the war, necessitating a reorganization of the state's decision-making system. It further argued that Iran must adapt to hybrid threats that erode both its soft and hard power, undertake structural reforms in its security apparatus, and enhance efficiency in responding to an increasingly complex threat landscape. The article stressed that the end of the war does not signify the end of the crisis or the beginning of a period of calm. Rather, Iran has entered a new stage that demands a redefinition of the foundations of power and an improvement in decision-making mechanisms that facilitate the government's ability to confront emerging strategic challenges. Specifically, the article called for a shift from tactical, reactive decision-making to a strategic approach based on scenario analysis, rather than ad hoc responses to concrete threats. The article recommended creating new institutions, including a "Strategic Command Center," to address the complex needs of the security, economic, and diplomatic sectors. In addition, it stressed the importance of restoring public trust as a central component of national security alongside military power.

Evidence of a lessons-learned process in Iran since the war can be seen in several steps already taken in recent weeks. These include efforts to rehabilitate and upgrade air defense and missile systems, as well as the installation of loudspeakers and emergency sirens in central locations in Tehran to improve civilian preparedness for emergencies. These developments reflect the recognition by Iran's political, military, and security leadership of the need to enhance readiness given the possibility of renewed fighting and further escalation in the coming months.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic is engaged in a heated internal debate over the war's implications and the changes that should be adopted in light of its lessons. Pragmatic circles are calling for a new policy in both domestic and foreign affairs, which includes governmental and economic reforms, expansion of political and civil freedoms, renewal of negotiations with the United States, and improvement of relations with the West in order to overcome the current crisis the country is facing. By contrast, hardline circles oppose any initiatives aimed at reform or moderation. This approach is demonstrated in the hardline daily *Vatan-e Emrooz*, which recently argued that the war with Israel proved the West recognizes only the language of force and that Iran can survive only through militant struggle and national resistance.

Ultimately, it is doubtful that the creation of the Defense Council and the reshuffling within the SNSC will equip Iran's leadership with the tools necessary for a comprehensive and effective response to the post-war reality. Only far-reaching changes in Iranian strategy, adapted to the dramatic developments in Iran and the region, together with significant

improvements in strategic military capabilities, reforms in the security, political, economic, and social spheres, and shifts in foreign policy could enhance the Islamic Republic's ability to cope with the challenges ahead. Foremost among these are the deepening domestic crisis, the severe damage to its nuclear program, the erosion of its strategic military capabilities (missiles and UAVs), and the weakening of its regional proxy network.

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