



## Spotlight on Iran



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### How to turn a lackluster diplomat into a president? Sa'id Jalili's election strategy

In recent days, Sa'id Jalili, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, has emerged as one of the most prominent candidates in Iran's presidential elections. This is owed to the growing support he is getting from elements in the conservative right and the possibility of the Supreme Leader supporting him thanks to the views that the two of them share in common and Jalili's political loyalty.

And yet, a number of fundamental weaknesses cast doubt on Jalili's chances of winning the elections—mostly his lack of political experience and the public's relative unfamiliarity with him or his plans. Jalili's supporters are now running a vigorous campaign—which started several weeks ago and intensified after he registered for the elections—to drive him to the presidential office. As part of the campaign, his supporters across Iran are making particularly extensive use of social media and creating dozens of blogs.

At this point, it appears that Jalili is focusing most of his efforts on the lower classes of society, the periphery, and the “hard core” regime supporters. His supporters are trying to portray him as a revolutionary committed to the weaker sectors of society who leads a modest lifestyle, a pious Muslim and disabled military veteran willing to sacrifice his own life for his homeland, and a politician who is loyal to the Supreme Leader and the principles of his policy.

It is still too early to estimate how successful Jalili's election strategy will prove in attracting considerable public support for his presidential bid. To a certain extent, however, it may compensate for his fundamental weaknesses—that is, if elements in the conservative right and such significant centers of power as the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij, and the religious establishment rally to his support, and particularly if the Supreme Leader tips the balance in his favor by expressing (or just insinuating) support for his candidacy.

On May 22, Dr. Amir Mohebbian, one of the top political commentators affiliated with the conservative camp, published an editorial in the daily Resalat titled “Sa’id Jalili’s weak and strong points”. In the article, Mohebbian said that, even though Jalili did not express much personal desire to run for president and did not make considerable efforts to mobilize support for his candidacy, the political circumstances have put him in an important position ahead of the elections and turned him into a leading candidate for the conservatives.

Mohebbian listed some of Jalili’s strengths and weaknesses. His five main weaknesses, according to the political commentator, are the following:

1. Little executive experience.
2. His service as diplomat, which has made his comportment calculated, conservative, and slow. This approach may become a problem for him in executive positions that require immediate and resolute action.
3. Inactive public relations: his shy nature reflects a passive approach to public opinion and to his environment, which is not what is normally expected of politicians. Jalili isn’t known for trying to influence others and has no ability to control his environment.
4. Impractical pursuit of justice. He recites slogans about pursuing justice, but has a tendency for generalizations and philosophizing. He talks about justice in its ideal sense but offers no practical plans to implement these ideals. This is particularly true when it comes to economy, which is not Jalili’s area of expertise.
5. He is not well known by the Iranian public.

Jalili’s strengths, according to Mohebbian, are the following:

1. He is young.
2. He has no negative background, which makes it less likely that his enemies will try to take advantage of his past to attack him and tarnish his reputation.
3. He has a positive image among the revolutionary forces due to his background in the Iran-Iraq War and his self-sacrifice, his polite and calm nature, and his devotion to the rule of the jurispudent.

Mohebbian’s final assessment was that, even though Jalili doesn’t have the makings of a president, it is not unlikely that the current conditions and developments will create an atmosphere that will put him in a position of leadership, despite initial predictions to

the contrary and despite his own reluctance to run in the elections ([www.resalat-news.com/Fa/?code=141044](http://www.resalat-news.com/Fa/?code=141044)).

Mohebbian's estimates are supported by comments posted in recent days by the readers of Serat News, a website affiliated with the conservative right. After the final list of presidential candidates approved by the Guardian Council was released, the website editors asked readers to share their opinions on the candidates who they did not intend to vote for, and explain why. Most readers who answered the question "Why am I not going to vote for Sa'id Jalili" put their decision down to his lack of political and executive experience, his failure to present clear, detailed plans to solve Iran's problems, and the fact that he follows in the footsteps of current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (<http://www.seratnews.ir/fa/news/113532/چرا-به-سعید-جلیلی-رای-نمی-دهم>).

### Who is Sa'id Jalili?

Sa'id Jalili was born in 1965 in the city of Mashhad. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Imam Sadegh University in Tehran. His doctoral thesis was concerned with political thought in the Quran and focused on foreign policy in the Islamic worldview.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Jalili served in the Basij. In 1986 he lost his leg in Operation Karbala-5, Iran's ground offensive against the Iraqi city of Basra.

In 1989 Jalili began working for the Iranian Foreign Ministry. In 2001-2005 he was director of policy planning in the Supreme Leader's office. In 2005 he came back to the Foreign Ministry. In October 2009 Jalili replaced Ali Larijani as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council.

### Jalili's election strategy: widespread media exposure

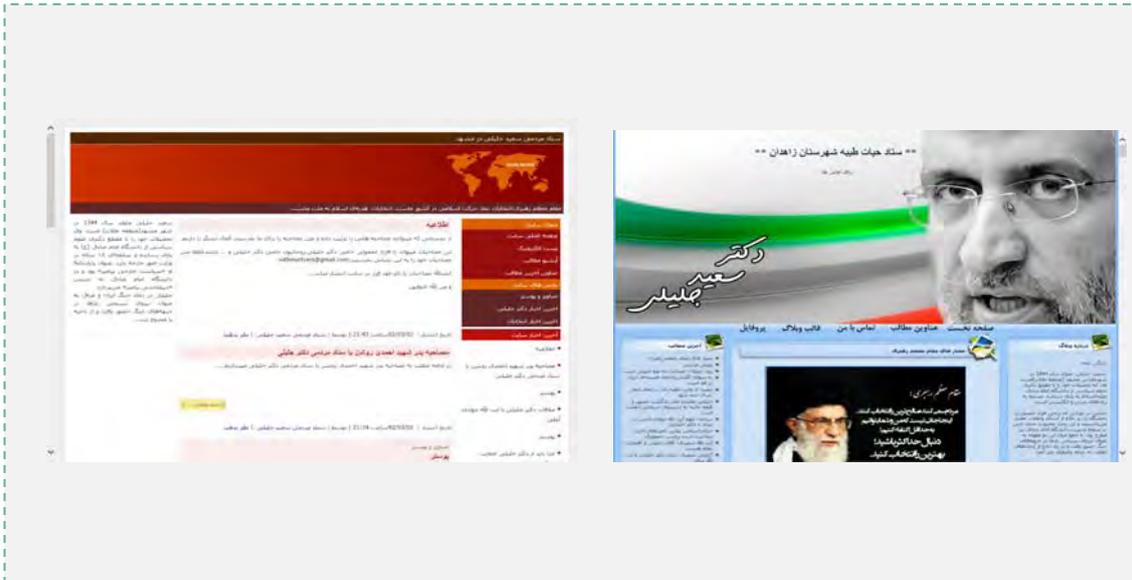
Even though Jalili didn't officially submit his presidential bid until May 11, the last day of registration for the elections, his supporters had started to promote his candidacy several weeks prior to that. Examination of the election strategy that they have adopted so far indicates that they seek to make up for his main weaknesses—mainly his relative obscurity—and put an emphasis on his positive public image.

At this point, it appears that Jalili is focusing most of his efforts to gain votes on the lower classes of Iran's society, the periphery areas, and "hard core" regime supporters. His supporters seem to be aiming to recreate President Ahmadinejad's achievement in the 2005 elections by portraying him as a candidate who offers an Islamic, popular model of government, a devoted revolutionary who sympathizes with the hardships faced by the weaker sectors of society and leads a modest lifestyle. At the same time, Jalili's supporters are stressing that, unlike Ahmadinejad, Jalili intends to remain absolutely loyal to the Supreme Leader and act in accordance with his stated policy.

One of Jalili's fundamental weaknesses is the Iranian public's relative unfamiliarity with him. Unlike one of his main opponents in the presidential race, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, who in recent years has become a well-known public figure thanks to his successful term as the mayor of Tehran, the public knows Jalili mostly from media reports about his diplomatic activity in his capacity as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator with the Western powers. While this position has improved his media exposure, it remains limited to the issue of nuclear negotiations and does not extend to the main questions that are of concern to the Iranian public in the current election campaign—mainly the economic crisis.

In an attempt to overcome this weakness, Jalili's supporters are making efforts to considerably improve his media presence and public exposure within a short period of time. For this purpose, they are making particularly extensive use of social media—even when compared to other candidates. Several days ago Jalili's supporters launched a program to have dozens of blogs created by his activists all across the country. Jalili's Virtual Headquarters website (<http://bloggers.saeedjalili.org>) already contains links to dozens of blogs affiliated with his supporters that offer information about Jalili himself, his views, and his activity. The website provides easy access to the blogs by clicking on a map of Iran's provinces. Each province name links to a page with details on blogs created by Jalili's supporters in that province.

The blog initiative launched by Jalili's supporters, titled "Each blog is a headquarters of support for Dr. Jalili", is not limited just to Tehran. Dozens of blogs have been created by his supporters in Iran's remote provinces; there are also blogs catering for specific professions—for instance, blogs for teachers who support Jalili. The blog initiative reflects Jalili's efforts to expand his support base among diverse sectors and in periphery areas with a greater concentration of relatively underprivileged populations often facing economic difficulties and long-standing neglect by the authorities.



A blog created by Jalili's supporters in Mashhad, his home town (<http://drjalilimashhad.blogfa.com>)

A blog created by Jalili's supporters in Zahedan, Sistan-Baluchestan Province (<http://saeed-jalily.blogfa.com>)



A blog for teachers and school principals who support Jalili (<http://jalili-moalem.blogfa.com>)

A blog created by Jalili's supporters in Bushehr, a city on the Persian Gulf coast (<http://drjalily-boushehr.blogfa.com>)

In addition to the blogging activity of his supporters, Jalili has expanded his presence on social networks and opened accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Google Plus.



Jalili on Instagram



One of Jalili's supporters' Facebook pages



Jalili on Google Plus



Jalili on Twitter

**A man of the common people, a humble revolutionary, a disabled war veteran “with a stain on his forehead”**

Jalili’s campaign is notable for the efforts made by his supporters to emphasize key characteristics of his public image and portray him as a revolutionary who is committed to the weaker sectors of society and leads a modest lifestyle, a pious Muslim, a disabled war veteran whose disability reflects his willingness to sacrifice himself, and a loyalist of the Supreme Leader and the principles of his policy.

The name chosen for Jalili's campaign headquarters—Rise of the Oppressed ( خیزش ) (مستضعفین)—reflects his ambition to broaden his support base among the weaker sectors of society. This is in contrast to some of the other notable candidates in the presidential race, including the two reformists Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad-Reza Aref, as well as Tehran's mayor Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, who are associated with the educated middle class.

Journalist Mehdi Faza'eli, one of Jalili's supporters, announced this week that Jalili is the only candidate with the ability to represent the lower classes of society, the other candidates representing the middle and high class. He noted that while all candidates are talking about justice and the underprivileged sectors, the people don't believe those candidates when they see the houses in which they live. Jalili, the journalist said, is the only candidate who can represent the masses of the people and promote the justice that he is talking about (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920302000738>).

As part of Jalili's attempts to appeal to voters in the weaker sectors of society, his supporters are putting an emphasis on his modest lifestyle. Immediately after Jalili's and Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's candidacies were registered on May 11, Jalili's supporters posted a photograph where he could be seen arriving at the Ministry of Interior in his Kia Pride, while Rafsanjani arrived in his blue Mercedes Benz limousine. News websites affiliated with the radical right wing of the conservative camp put up both photographs side by side with the following title: "The difference between Sa'id Jalili's car and Hashemi Rafsanjani's".



**Jalili flies tourist class ([www.facebook.com/Dr.Saeed.Jalili](http://www.facebook.com/Dr.Saeed.Jalili))**

Jalili's campaign also stresses his religious piety and his commitment to the religious establishment. This commitment takes on added meaning when examined in the context of the criticism made in recent years by top clerics about Ahmadinejad and his supporters ("the deviant faction"), who challenged the religious establishment, emphasized the Iranian cultural component over the Islamic religious component in Iran's national identity, and encouraged messianic ideas.

Just one day after his candidacy was approved by the Guardian Council, Jalili traveled to the city of Qom and met with some of the top clerics there. Iran's clerics have, in fact, lost some of their status in the past several years and their presence in the publicly elected political institutions—such as the Majles—has diminished to a considerable extent. Further evidence of this trend can be seen in the list of eight candidates for Iran's next president: only one, Hassan Rouhani, is a cleric by education. However, the top clerics still enjoy considerable public influence, particularly among the traditional sectors of society, and Iran's high-ranking politicians therefore attach a great deal of importance—if only formally—to meeting with the top clerics in Qom and informing them of their plans.

At his meetings with the clerics, Jalili said that, while many countries in the world practice democracy, Iran practices Islam, which is superior to democracy. He stressed the need for the government's policy in the areas of politics, society, economy, and culture to be based on Islamic thought, and spoke about the need to convince the people that religion should not be limited to worship alone but rather integrated into all spheres of life (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920301000383>).



One possible proof of Jalili's piety is the prominent stain on his forehead, which is characteristic of pious Muslim men. The stain comes from resting one's forehead on the floor while praying.



Another issue that is being emphasized by Jalili's supporters on social networks is his active participation in the Iran-Iraq War and the physical disability he received in the war. His disability is portrayed as a manifestation of his willingness to sacrifice himself for his homeland. Many photographs from the Iran-Iraq War have been posted on websites affiliated with Jalili's supporters and on social networks, and his wartime injury

is given a prominent place in his official biography. His service in the Basij in the 1980s, too, may help him broaden his support base in the Basij and the Revolutionary Guards. Perhaps it will even allow him to take advantage of the extensive infrastructure these organizations possess—such as “circles of the righteous”, part of a training program for Basij members that operates across Iran—to promote his candidacy.<sup>1</sup>



**Jalili during the Iran-Iraq War**

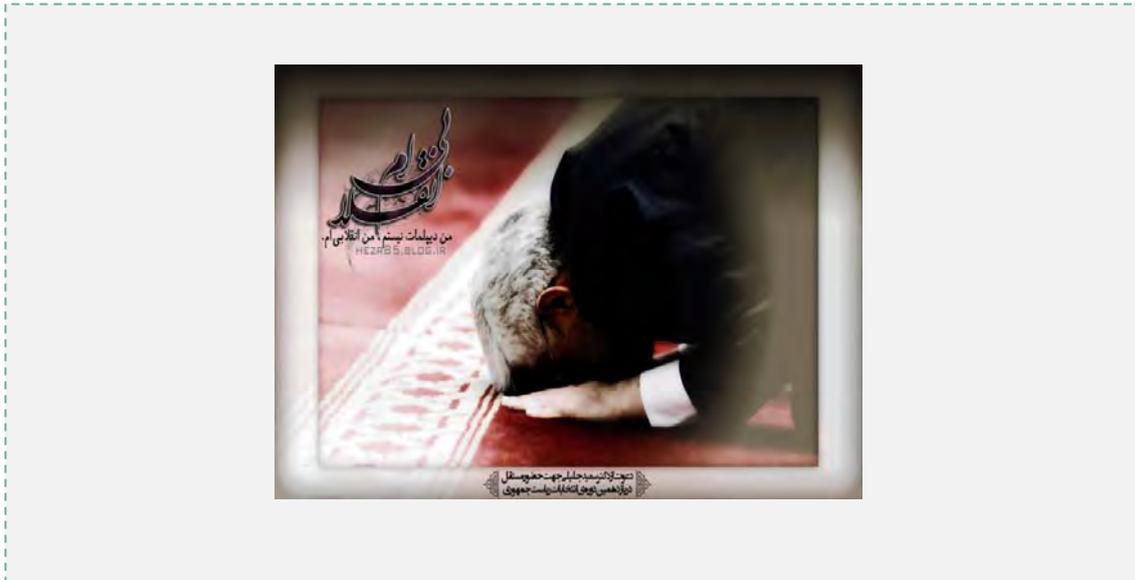
On the backdrop of the strong differences of opinion that have emerged between the Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad in recent years, Jalili is stressing his absolute loyalty to Khamenei and his stated policy. In the past several days Jalili has stated on several occasions that the president of Iran must give allegiance to the Supreme Leader. At a meeting with top clerics in the city of Qom, Jalili said that this loyalty also needs to manifest itself through the president’s actions. He noted that, even in cases where the president’s position goes against that of the Supreme Leader, he must act in accordance with the position of the Supreme Leader, who is the ultimate arbiter in all matters ([http://hemasehsiyasi.com/Detail\\_Page/235](http://hemasehsiyasi.com/Detail_Page/235)).

In his statements about his views on issues that concern Iran’s foreign policy, Jalili once again reiterates the Supreme Leader’s familiar views. Unlike some of the candidates, including Rouhani and Qalibaf, who have taken a different position than that of the Supreme Leader and even expressed their willingness—albeit qualified—to

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see our May 14, 2013 Information Bulletin: “Spotlight on Iran - “Circles of the righteous”: a vehicle for the Basij to potentially influence the presidential election campaign”.

begin negotiating with the United States, Jalili announced that he is fundamentally opposed to such negotiations. Khamenei's familiar views have also been echoed in Jalili's statements on other issues, including the nuclear policy, Iran's policy towards Syria, and the definition of the uprisings in the Arab world as the manifestation of an "Islamic awakening" inspired by the Islamic revolution in Iran.



**"I am not a diplomat, I am a revolutionary"**

The efforts to bolster Jalili's status can also be seen in the emphasis given to reactions in the Western world to the announcement on his nomination. An election bulletin published in recent days on behalf of Jalili's campaign headquarters contained an extensive report on the reactions in the West to his nomination as candidate (<http://aghasaeed.com/images/Untitled-1.pdf>). The reports on the reactions of Western media to Jalili's nomination are also intended to emphasize his uncompromising political views, which, according to his supporters, give concern to the enemies of Iran, and thus to boost his public status, particularly among citizens who support the regime and are affiliated with the right wing of the conservative camp.

It is still too early to estimate how successful Jalili's election strategy will prove in attracting considerable public support for his presidential bid. To a certain extent, however, it may compensate for his fundamental weaknesses, mainly his lack of political and executive experience and limited media exposure (so far) to the public. This will be especially true if elements in the conservative right and such significant centers of power as the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij, and the religious

establishment rally to his support, and particularly if the Supreme Leader tips the balance in his favor by expressing (or just insinuating) support for his candidacy.

