

Iran

Iran replaces top security official at crucial moment in talks over Strait of Hormuz

Mohsen Rezaei appointed head of Supreme National Security Council after Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr steps down



Mohsen Rezaei, right, with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian © Mohammed Salem/Reuters

Bita Ghaffari in Tehran and **Andrew England** in London

Published YESTERDAY

Iran's top security official has resigned and been replaced by another veteran commander of the powerful Revolutionary Guards at a critical moment for diplomatic efforts to seal a deal to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

Iranian state media reported late on Sunday that Mohsen Rezaei, who is also an adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, had replaced Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr as secretary of Iran's powerful Supreme National Security Council.

Rezaei will also be Khamenei's representative to the council, while Zolghadr — who was appointed just months ago after his [predecessor Ali Larijani was killed](#) in an air strike in March — has been given the role of political adviser to the supreme leader.

It was not immediately clear how the changes will affect Tehran's stance — both Rezaei and Zolghadr are hardliners and have previously commanded the guards, the military force that has become more empowered since the US and Israel launched their war against Iran in February.

Vali Nasr, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, said there would not be much difference between the two men “when it comes to advocating a strong stance against the US on the battlefield and at the negotiating table”.

“Rezaei, as a more senior former commander and longest-serving commander of the IRGC [guards], has far more authority and gravitas with military men than Zolghadr,” he said. “If anything [it] is tightening of control by Mojtaba over the IRGC and decision making.”

Any deal to open the strait must be approved by the security council and Khamenei.

Zolghadr said on Saturday that for [Tehran to agree a deal to open the waterway](#), the US should withdraw its forces from the vicinity of the republic, pay compensation for war damage and lift its sanctions.

His comments came days after Iranian diplomats said Tehran and Oman were in the final stages of agreeing a new arrangement to manage traffic through the Gulf chokepoint.



Like Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, pictured, Mohsen Rezaei is a veteran Revolutionary Guards commander © Vahid Salemi/AP

Zolghadr's statement was echoed by a spokesperson for the IRGC and Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi, who has been leading the negotiations with Muscat.

"The agreement with Oman may happen, but reopening the strait is conditional on a number of requirements," Araghchi said on Sunday. "To us, there is no possibility of resuming the negotiations [with Washington] until the US ends its violations of the memorandum of understanding and compensates for what it has violated."

The US and Iran agreed an MoU in June that was meant to extend a ceasefire and allow shipping to gradually return to its prewar levels, toll-free.

But that interim deal, which was supposed to lead to talks on a final settlement to end the war, collapsed after Iran targeted ships transiting through a channel along Oman's coast. Tehran said the ships were using an "unauthorised" route. The attacks triggered a wave of escalatory tit-for-tat strikes between the US and Iran.

The hostilities eased as Iran held talks with Oman to agree on a temporary route through the waterway, which diplomats hoped would resolve the stand-off.

Rezaei commanded the guards during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, has held various senior roles in the Islamic republic and previously made unsuccessful bids to be president.

After [Ali Khamenei was killed](#) in the first US-Israeli air strikes in late February, he became a military adviser to Mojtaba Khamenei after he succeeded his father as supreme leader.

Hamid-Reza Taraghi, a conservative politician, said Zolghadr's resignation had nothing to do with security issues, adding that his comments on the conditions for reopening the strait were in line with Khamenei's views.

"Iran's tougher stance is based on the military posture the US has taken in the region in recent days, its co-operation with Israel, and Israel's readiness to assist in an attack on Iran," Taraghi said. "Zolghadr's position was announced in accordance with the leader's views; these conditions must be fulfilled in order for the negotiations to continue."

Taraghi said it was natural for different positions on the strait to exist within the ruling system, but

Khamenei ultimately decided Tehran's position.

However, Saeed Laylaz, an Iranian political analyst, said the mixed messaging from Tehran was a result of limited access to Khamenei and "wartime conditions".

Khamenei, who was wounded in the strikes that killed his father, has not been seen or heard in public since the war.

"But these sometimes contradictory signals in Iran's behaviour are nothing new," Laylaz said, referring to longstanding debates and competition between rival factions within the ruling system.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, a reformist who also chairs the security council, on Saturday advocated for a deal on the strait.

He said it was "the best time to reach an agreement since there is cohesion, strength and unity in the country".

"We cannot fight forever. It has to be brought to an end at some point," said Pezeshkian, who recently met Khamenei, according to the supreme leader's office.

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