

## WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

## Iranian speaker takes more central role

Qalibaf has long been member of nation's elite

Parisa Hafezi  
REUTERS

DUBAI – Iran's parliament speaker, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, is taking a more central role as Israeli and U.S. strikes pick off the Islamic Republic's political leadership, making him a critical figure at a decisive moment.

With fewer of Iran's most prominent figures remaining, the former Revolutionary Guards commander, Tehran mayor, national police chief and presidential candidate is now a key node between the political, security and clerical elites.

Nearly three weeks after the sudden assault on Iran began with the killing of then-Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the leadership in Tehran is engaged in a bitter attritional effort to outlast its assailants.

Qalibaf, long seen as a protégé of Khamenei and a confidant of his son Mojtaba who has succeeded to the position of supreme leader, has been a leading voice of defiance against Israel and the United States, vowing revenge for their attack.

Addressing President Donald Trump

and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after the killing of Ali Khamenei, he promised "such devastating blows that you will be begging."

"I say to these two dirty criminals and their agents: you have stepped on our red line and you have to pay for it," he declared in a television speech.

That fiery rhetoric reflects his long-standing position as a fierce disciple of the Islamic Republic's theocratic system of government, a stance he has also demonstrated through helping to crush displays of internal dissent.

Yet despite that hard-line profile, Qalibaf has also built a reputation as a modernizer and pragmatist, posing during his 2005 presidential run in his uniform as a qualified pilot for campaign ads to bolster his image as a professional.

#### Presidential runs

Born in the northeastern town of Torqabeh in 1961, Qalibaf's early life was partly shaped by lectures he attended in mosques as a teenager, according to Iranian media, as the 1979 Islamic Revolution gathered steam.

When Iraq invaded Iran months after the ruling shah was ousted, Qalibaf joined the Revolutionary Guards, a new military unit devoted to upholding the



Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf has been a leading voice of defiance against Israel and the United States amid the war.

AMR ABDALLAH DALSH/REUTERS FILE

country's new Islamic system, rising to become a general within three years.

Pursuing a career with the Guards after the war ended, he qualified as a military pilot and eventually became head of the Guards' air force unit.

While with the Guards, he took part in a bloody crackdown on university students in 1999 and joined other commanders in signing a letter to the reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, threatening to oust him if he did not curb protests.

Khamenei, caught between growing discontent at home and foreign pressure over Iran's nuclear program, in-

creasingly turned to security hawks like Qalibaf as the reformist movement ran out of steam.

As police chief, he could be ruthless – ordering his forces to fire on protesters in 2002 – while trying to court modernizers by smartening up the disheveled police with new uniforms.

Yet when he ran for president in 2005, trying to appeal to middle- and lower-income voters, his populist credentials were outdone by the firebrand Tehran Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Khamenei eventually swung his support away from his favored former general to the new man.

Qalibaf never stopped seeking the presidency, running unsuccessfully in 2013 and 2024, and pulling out of the 2017 race to avoid splitting the hard-line vote.

He replaced Ahmadinejad as Tehran mayor, holding the post for 12 years and taking credit for helping suppress months of unrest that rocked the establishment after his predecessor was declared winner of a disputed election in 2009.

His 12-year stint as mayor was followed by his return to national politics with his election to parliament and installation as speaker in 2020, giving him one of the top posts in Iranian politics.



Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Maryland, speaks in Washington on March 18 in front of a memorial made up of shoes and backpacks symbolizing those killed in the bombing of an elementary school in Iran. MATT MCCLAIN/GETTY IMAGES

## Huge funding request faces stiff opposition in Congress

Patricia Zengerle and Steve Holland  
REUTERS

WASHINGTON – The U.S. military's request for \$200 billion in additional funding for the Iran war met with stiff opposition in Congress on March 19, as Democrats and even some Republicans questioned the need for the money after large defense appropriations last year.

A U.S. official confirmed a Washington Post report that the Department of War, formally known as the Department of Defense, has asked the White House to approve a more than \$200 billion request to Congress to fund the war in Iran.

President Donald Trump has not yet sent a request for the Senate and House to approve the huge sum and his administration made clear the number could change.

"I think that number could move, obviously. It takes money to kill bad guys," Secretary of War Pete Hegseth told a news conference on March 19. "So we're going back to Congress and folks there to ensure that we're properly funded for what's been done, for what we may have to do in the future."

Early indications suggest that the war will be the most expensive for the United States since the long conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Administration officials told lawmakers that the first six days of the Iran war had cost more than \$11 billion.

Opinion polls show that the war is not popular, with only about 1 in 4 Americans supporting it.

Congress has already approved record funding for the military since Trump began his second term in January 2025. Last month, he signed into law the Fiscal 2026 Defense Appropriations Act with about \$840 billion in funding. And last summer, over stiff opposition from Democrats, the Republican-led Congress passed a

sweeping tax cut and spending bill that included \$156 billion for defense.

Democrats questioned why the Pentagon needed more money, given recent cuts to social services, foreign aid and other programs, and said that no one who opposes the war should vote to fund it.

U.S. and Israeli forces launched the campaign against Iran on Feb. 28. As the war neared the end of its third week, lawmakers, both Democrats and some Republicans, have clamored for more information about Trump's plans for a conflict that has killed thousands of people, disrupted the lives of millions of others and roiled world energy and stock markets.

"We just heard that the Pentagon is putting forward a request for \$200 billion more for this war. How on Earth are we going to pay for that? It is absolutely ridiculous," Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Washington, said in a speech in the House.

After receiving briefings from administration officials, lawmakers estimated the war is costing \$1 billion to \$2 billion per day.

Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Maryland, said the request should be a non-starter with members of Congress. "The best way to end this war, protect our troops, save civilian lives, and rein in a lawless Administration is to cut off funding. I'm a hell no," he wrote on X.

Some of Trump's fellow Republicans also seemed surprised at the amount being considered. Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee, told reporters at the Capitol late on March 18 she had not yet been notified about a \$200 billion supplemental request.

She said the total is "considerably higher than I would have guessed, but I don't know how it's broken down."

Collins also said she would most likely want a public hearing on such a request.

## Iran

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Netanyahu later on March 19 said that Israel acted alone in the bombing of Iran's South Pars gas field and confirmed that Trump asked Israel to hold off on such attacks.

Iran is being "decimated" and no longer has the capacity to enrich uranium or make ballistic missiles after 20 days of U.S.-Israeli air attacks, but a revolution in the country would not come from the air and would require a "ground component," he said, without elaborating.

As the Israeli leader spoke, Iran launched a new wave of missiles toward his country, according to Israel's military and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Israel's military said late on March 19 that the Air Force had carried out over 130 strikes on targets in western and central Iran over the past day, including ballistic missile launchers, drones and air defense systems.

Separately, authorities in the United Arab Emirates said they had dismantled a "terrorist network" funded and operated by Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran.

#### 'Oil shock' threat

With no end in sight almost three weeks into the war, and the threat of a global "oil shock" growing by the day, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Japan issued a joint statement expressing "our readiness to contribute to appropriate efforts to ensure safe passage through the Strait."

They also promised "other steps to stabilise energy markets, including working with certain producing nations to increase output."

There was little indication of any immediate move. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz reiterated that any contribution to securing the strait would come only after hostilities ended.

The resistance by major U.S. allies to



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks at a news conference in Jerusalem on March 19. RONEN ZVULUN/POOL VIA REUTERS

becoming involved in the war reflects skepticism over a conflict European leaders have said has unclear objectives that they did not seek and over which they have little control.

Israel's bombing of Iran's South Pars gas field, which Trump said the United States had not known about, suggested gaps in coordination of strategy and war aims between the allies.

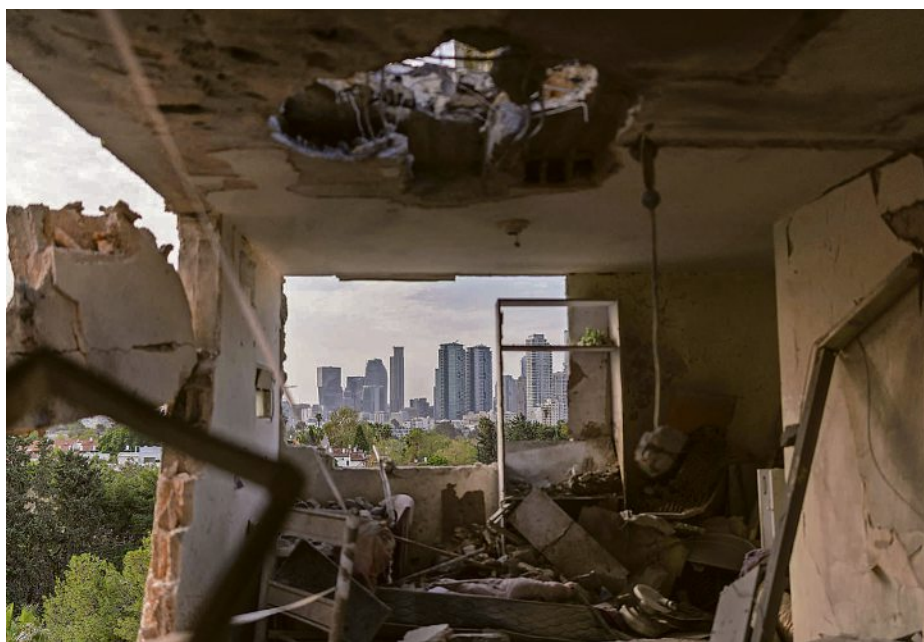
Adding to the confusion around the attack, three Israeli officials said the operation had taken place in consultation with the United States, but was unlikely to be repeated.

Iran's military said strikes on Iran's energy infrastructure had led to "a new stage in the war" in which it had attacked energy facilities linked to the United States. "If strikes [on Iran's energy facilities] happen again, further attacks on your energy infrastructure and that of your allies will not stop until it is completely destroyed," said Iranian military spokesman Ebrahim Zolfaqari, according to state media.

QatarEnergy's CEO told Reuters the Iranian attacks had knocked out a sixth of Qatar's LNG export capacity, worth \$20 billion a year, and that repairs would take three to five years.

Israeli media reported that an Iranian strike hit oil facilities in Israel's port of Haifa, causing damage but no casualties.

Since March 18, Iranian attacks have also forced the UAE to shut its Habshan gas facility and set off fires at two Kuwaiti oil refineries.



The Tel Aviv skyline is visible in the background at a damaged apartment following an overnight Iranian missile strike on March 19.

ILIA YEFIMOVICH/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES