

IRAN'S PRESIDENTIAL IRANS ELECTIONS PRÄSIDENTSCHAFTSWAHLEN 1f... ————— 2021



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PREFACE

In June 2021, Iranians were asked to the polls to elect their new president – in what became one of the most controversial votes in the Islamic Republic’s history. The election was to find a successor to President Hassan Rouhani, who could not run again after two terms in office. But, as it turned out, it opened a new chapter in post-revolutionary Iranian politics beyond this: even by the standards of the Islamic Republic, the extent to which the nezam, the unelected deep-state, interfered in the electoral process was novel. At home and abroad, criticism mounted amid the widespread exclusion of serious contenders for the eventual winner, Ebrahim Raisi.

The circumstances and implications of Iran’s 2021 elections merit a thorough discussion. To contribute to this discussion, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) hosted a blog between May and July 2021. Internationally renowned experts shared their views on various aspects relevant to the elections, ranging from domestic politics, economic and social matters to foreign affairs.

The debate about how to evaluate Iran’s 2021 elections continues, with many questions about its consequences for policy, Iranian politics, and the Islamic Republic’s polity remaining open. In light of this, we seek to make available with this publication the contributions from the blog, now and in the future, for readers with an interest in Iran’s 2021 elections. As contemporary texts, they reflect views and observations of the weeks surrounding the vote. Read in retrospect, we hope the blog’s pieces will aid the highly relevant discussion.



THE FES BLOG ON THE IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS OF 2021

A MULTIFACETED DEBATE WITH AN OPEN, CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

On June 18 the people of Iran can elect a new president for their country. The candidates are vying to succeed Hassan Rouhani, who having served two terms is ineligible to run again. His presidency, which began in 2013 with the promise of a new beginning under the banner of “prudence and hope” (tadbir va omid), has ended in a multidimensional crisis.

On the domestic front, Rouhani’s efforts to implement reforms, such as strengthening civil rights or introducing international norms in the economy, came to nothing. His plans to curb corruption and nepotism failed too. On the foreign policy front, the greatest achievement of his presidency, the conclusion of the 2015 Vienna nuclear agreement, was undone by the unilateral withdrawal of the United States in 2018. Washington’s subsequent imposition of sanctions plunged the Iranian economy into its deepest recession since the war with Iraq in the 1980s. Iran’s problems were then exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, the fourth wave of which is currently ravaging the country.

Against this background, the situation in Iran has deteriorated considerably in recent years. Large segments of the population have suffered great economic hardship, which was accompanied by a shrinking of the middle class and a steep rise in the poverty rate. In recent years protests have taken place all over the country, with Iranians expressing their displeasure with the political and economic conditions in the country. The state suppressed these protests with enormous harshness, even by the standards of the Islamic Republic. Hundreds of people have died, while the country’s prisons are filled with thousands of political prisoners – and the numbers are rising.

In view of this situation, it remains uncertain whether a majority of Iranians will heed the call to vote and actually go to the polls in a month’s time. Disenchantment with politics has become widespread and is now also reflected in opinion polls by local media.

Meanwhile, the hardliners are working to further expand their power in the country. They already won a clear victory in the parliamentary elections of 2020, facilitated by the mass exclusion of candidates from the camp of moderates and reformers. The price for this victory, however, was a historically low voter participation rate – the Islamic Republic is losing its people.

A decisive factor in Iranian elections is which candidates are permitted to run in the first place. The so-called Guardian Council massively undermines political competition. This body, which is de facto not legitimized by the people, decides according to political criteria who may run in elections for parliament and the presidency. The fact that elections in the Islamic Republic are neither free nor fair is therefore as obvious as it is significant.

Nevertheless, in Iran political competition and the field of political actors are broader than in most other countries in the region. And it’s not just that: in the elections themselves it is by no means clear in advance who will win. Observers expected neither the 2005 change from Mohammad Khatami to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad nor the 2013 change from Ahmadinejad to Rouhani. Within the (narrow) confines of the Islamic Republic’s political system, presidents also have the ability to make their mark. Rouhani, Ahmadinejad, Khatami and previously Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani all did so, both at home and abroad.



Thus it is worth taking an open, critical look at the upcoming presidential elections in Iran. This FES blog aims to host a diverse, multi-faceted debate, highlighting aspects that are important to Iranians in the context of the vote. But it also considers fundamental issues like the question of the importance of elections in an autocratic system, as well as the perspectives of selected regional actors. By discussing these questions — which tend to go beyond current events — the blog intends to supplement the ongoing press coverage of the elections.

The blog is published in both German and English and sustained by contributions from renowned international experts.

Enjoy reading!

WHAT IRAN'S NEW PRESIDENT MEANS FOR EUROPE

Eight years of European thinking that Tehran could be a partner will end when a hardliner becomes Iran's next president. This reality check should compel the EU to address not only the nuclear file but also regional security threats.

Europeans obviously do not decide elections in countries outside of Europe, even though they may have their preferences. Four years ago, when Ebrahim Raisi unsuccessfully ran against incumbent president Hassan Rouhani, the two looked like stark alternatives: the moderate officeholder who had just agreed to curb the country's nuclear program versus an unknown hardline cleric. Now the latter, also a conservative judge, has been elected to succeed his previous adversary thanks to his first-round victory last Friday over a very limited number of opponents. However, instead of big change, Iranians – and European governments – are likely to get more of the same.

That is because the Iranian regime had already turned away from the pragmatic course that Rouhani promised in his first campaign, which led to the 2015 nuclear deal. It was the United States' 2018 rejection of this agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA, that put the brakes on Iran's international opening.


Today, the so-called Principlists control all levers of power in the Islamic Republic, both the elected ones such as the parliament and presidency and the unelected ones, from the supreme leader to the judiciary and the security apparatus.

To achieve this outcome, the system's rules were bent to directly favor the frontrunner for the presidency. The Guardian Council cleared the field of candidates so that Raisi would face no serious competition. The members of this clerical-legal body were mostly handpicked either by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, or by the man who served as the head of the judiciary for the past two years, Raisi himself. Bending the rules was even more important than ensuring that the election would excite the public: voter turnout already fell to a [historically low 42.5%](#) in the parliamentary election in 2020, which brought the Majles under conservative control; the officially announced result for the June 2021 election shows voter turnout at [less than 49%](#) – with millions of ballots deliberately made invalid in an apparent sign of protest.

This conservative turn means that the Europeans will have a much tougher time once Raisi enters office, whether in the ongoing nuclear negotiations, the bilateral approach to Iran, or the regional file. There is no longer a veneer of moderation to the Islamic Republic; Tehran is sending out a consistent hardline message.

CONCLUDING THE NUCLEAR TALKS DURING THE LAME DUCK PERIOD

Talks to revive the nuclear deal continued for one day after the election and were then adjourned until another, now seventh, 'final final' round begins. Negotiators had initially aimed to find a compromise over both America's and Iran's return to compliance with the JCPOA prior to the presidential election. Now, the goal is to do so before the inauguration of the next government by early August, even though the election result will not change much on Iran's side anyway. This is because the supreme leader already gave the green light to a return to the JCPOA under the condition that the United States lift its sanctions.



A more immediate concern is the International Atomic Energy Agency's ability to inspect Iran's nuclear installations. [An interim agreement on this issue has just expired](#), threatening to severely curtail the agency's eyes and ears on the ground – and to derail the talks in Vienna. Given that the Iranian leadership appears to be banking on the eventual lifting of sanctions, however, this could be seen as posturing to create a sense of urgency among negotiators to find a compromise.

If a deal reviving the JCPOA can indeed be agreed by the time when Raisi assumes the presidency, he will effectively be able to bask in the benefits of that decision while blaming any remaining faults on his predecessor. And the Europeans should begin to set their sights on the many other problems this country poses for them – beginning with what the return of the hardliners to the presidency means for Iranian society.

THE MAN AT THE HELM HAS BLOOD ON HIS HANDS

The 60-year-old Raisi is a middle-ranked cleric (hojatoleslam) steeped in the country's judicial system. He hails from a clerical family in the Shia holy city of Mashhad and holds [conservative views](#) on a range of social issues, from a dress code to Internet use, as well as on the Islamization of universities. In fact, Raisi claims to be a direct descendant of the prophet – hence the “Sayed” in his name and the black turban on his head.

The next president happens to be, in effect, a first-time politician. He rose from being deputy prosecutor of Tehran after the 1979 revolution to attorney general by 2014, becoming chief justice in 2019 following his failed presidential bid. Between 2016 and 2019, Raisi also ran the Astan Quds Razavi foundation that guards the Imam Ali shrine of his hometown. This is one of Iran's largest and wealthiest conglomerates, with holdings in construction, agriculture, energy, telecommunications, and financial services. It was placed [under US sanctions](#) in January 2021. The US Treasury has sanctioned Raisi himself, accusing him of advancing the regime's [“domestic and foreign oppression”](#) as he led the crackdown against the November 2019 mass protests. This resulted in (at least) hundreds of deaths, with thousands still in custody.

Importantly, Raisi is most notorious for his alleged role as a [member of a four-person death panel](#) that oversaw the killing of thousands of political prisoners in 1988, a charge that he denies. As much as this repels any civic-minded Iranian, it endears Raisi to the regime's insiders because it means he has a vested interest in maintaining the system – and, if anything hardening it.

With Raisi leading the Iranian government, any hope for reform from within will be gone. [Unlike Rouhani, who spoke of holding a referendum to reform the state leadership](#) after Khamenei's eventual passing, Raisi appears determined to maintain – even cement – the status quo, possibly seeing himself as the next supreme leader.

All this will make any European initiative directed at Iran's domestic sphere more difficult to execute. Already, there is [little room for the “constructive engagement”](#) the EU keeps hoping for once the nuclear deal is back on track. The Iranian leadership has refused Western vaccines and aid, thus hampering humanitarian cooperation during the pandemic. Moreover, it views academics with international contacts as potential spies, which stalls efforts to help the country's battered environment.

Lastly, with a verdict looming in a [Swedish court case against a suspected collaborator of Raisi in the 1988 killings](#), there is certainly a chance that an (indirect) juridical implication of Iran's new president could disrupt European-Iranian political dialogue, just as the [‘Mykonos verdict’](#) of a German court on the murder of four opposition politicians did back in 1997.



TAKING IN THE BIGGER PICTURE: REGIONAL SECURITY

Even if a reactivated JCPOA brings renewed control over Iran’s nuclear program and limited trade, it won’t be a springboard for an internal opening. Still, by taking the threat of the bomb off the table it should allow for a more coordinated focus on regional security.

The new president will likely continue to pursue Iran’s regional policies of extending its reach through proxies while being open to diplomacy with worried neighbors. Having given little indication whatsoever about his own priorities, Raisi is expected to yield to the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which controls regional activities in consultation with the supreme leader. In recent years these activities have included both violent attacks, for example on Arab tankers and oil installations, and talks on issues such as maritime security and regional de-escalation with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, respectively. Hence, the new Iranian leadership will be hard-nosed about its security interests, but without any isolationist streaks.

For the EU, this represents an opportunity to update its own approach, turning away from its focus on the nuclear file to take in the bigger, regional picture. The political grounds are shifting: Israel has concluded diplomatic accords with two Gulf states, some of the latter have begun talking to Tehran, and Washington would like to extricate itself from a conflict-prone theatre. Time for Europe to come in with proposals for how to organize [collective security in the Persian Gulf](#).

RAISI'S ROADMAP FOR THE ECONOMY: MORE THAN A FATA MORGANA?

How realistic are the new president's grand promises for the Iranian economy? There is currently little reason to believe that Raisi will keep those pledges. And are they even feasible?

Promising a "gateway to the green garden." [That is how liberal business magazine](#) Tejarat-e Farda termed this year's presidential election campaign on its front cover. The weekly journal described the candidates' ambitious proclamations as nothing but "empty promises."

There is no need to be familiar with the Persian idiom and knowing what it means to grasp the point made in that cover story. A quick glance at the gloomy image of a small door standing ajar amid an arid desert, presenting an illusory pathway towards an oasis, makes the message clear.

"How did presidential elections become a contest between misleading promises?" Tejarat-e Farda subsequently enquired, criticizing the lack of any mention of plans for structural reforms during election campaigns in Iran. As there are no parties in Iran and the candidates do not publish detailed election manifestos, voters do not know which economic views the aspirants espouse nor precisely which approach they advocate. In this election, political slogans and, in some cases, outright populist promises (once again) played a greater role than genuine economic programs.

In this context, it is vital to consider how much scope presidents actually have to initiate economic reforms, since the causes of Iran's economic problems are political rather than administrative. Given the constraints on their power and authority, presidents can only exert influence in this realm to a limited degree. That was also one of the main reasons for the historically low turnout in this year's presidential elections.


Ebrahim Raisi, who won the election, also made numerous promises during his campaign. Against that backdrop, he presented his Roadmap for the Economy, divided into seven categories: "Increasing production and exports," "Reducing costs for families," "Reform of budgetary structures," "Raising incomes," "Financial sector reform," "Fiscal reform" and finally "Greater transparency."

The explanations addressing these goals and the measures for achieving them are, however, couched in very general and vague terms. Nonetheless, the new president will be judged in light of these objectives.

BUDGET DEFICIT

The chronic shortfall in the state budget is the "mother of all problems" for the Iranian economy. Most of the available solutions for this particular dilemma are purely political.

Raisi asserts that he will ensure "precise implementation" of the operational budget – without, however, stating exactly what he means by this. Irrespective of that, considerably greater efforts will be required to get to grips with the structural budget deficit. Sanctions would need to be lifted, foreign relations normalized, oil exports reinstated,



subsidies reduced, tax exemptions for state-controlled foundations and organizations scrapped, and spending would also need to be slashed. Implementing all these measures requires resolute backing from the entire political establishment (which Raisi currently seems to enjoy – although this should not lead anyone to jump to hasty conclusions, as the example of Ahmadinejad’s fall from grace reveals).

According to official statistics, the budget deficit in the current Persian year will be approximately 3,200 trillion IRR (around 10.5 billion Euro with a floating exchange rate). That is about 40 percent of the total budget. The Central Bank of Iran’s foreign exchange earnings have averaged \$45 billion annually over the past 20 years. However, in the last two years, after the reimposition of US sanctions, that figure shrank further, to just \$9 billion per annum. [Iran’s oil minister](#) has stated that the country’s oil revenues have fallen by over \$100 billion over the past three years.

If sanctions are lifted in the coming months, injecting oil revenues into the Iranian economy would pose a further challenge for the new Iranian government. If not managed properly, a sudden upsurge in resources (likely to be around \$50 billion per year) after over two years of the economy being throttled by sanctions could constitute a shock for Iran’s economy.

“STEERING” THE MONETARY SUPPLY

The chronic budget deficit is the proximate cause of another highly significant challenge: growing liquidity. In the last ten years alone, the money supply in Iran has increased more than tenfold.

Nevertheless, many Iranian companies do not have adequate funding. High inflation coupled with the devaluation of the currency mean that Iranians are more likely to invest in assets such as real estate, gold, or foreign exchange to hedge against loss of purchasing power. Raisi, like many other Iranian policymakers, repeatedly stresses that this money supply must be “directed towards production.”

However, it would be a mistake to view “steering monetary supply” as simply granting loans to the manufacturing sector. Many policymakers in Iran are convinced that there is a great need for investment in industry, as companies do not have access to capital. But there is substantial evidence to the contrary. The lack of demand for investment in production is the real problem, not a lack of financial resources.

That leads directly to a further problem for the Iranian economy. One important indicator of declining demand for investment is the way in which gross fixed capital formation (the value of assets acquired by domestic economic units for use in the production process for more than 12 months) has evolved in recent years. The growth rate of such gross fixed capital formation has been declining significantly since the mid-2000s. Since 2011, growth in gross fixed capital formation has been negative in most years and the real investment rate has sunk from year to year.

In fact, a very rare phenomenon has been observable in Iran’s economy over the past decade. During this period, the downward trend in new investment has reached a point where such new investment is lower per annum than the depreciation of existing assets. In other words, the depreciation of machinery and other assets has been greater than overall economic investment. As a result, the country’s net capital assets [have shrunk over the past two years](#).

At his first press conference, Raisi simply stated that Iran is “one of the safest locations” for business and that his government would guarantee security for all entrepreneurs and investors. However, boosting investment demand involves much more than that. Simply “directing money into production” is not the answer. Instead, further measures are vital, such as effective inflation control, eliminating corruption, improving the business environment, removing red tape, or establishing a uniform exchange rate.

INFLATION

Extremely high inflation is another chronic ailment that afflicts the Iranian economy, while simultaneously being a consequence of budget deficits and increased money supply. Figures from the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) indicate that inflation was 43 percent in the 12-month period that ended on May 20th. That is the highest level in the last 26 years. Raisi's roadmap pledges that in two years the inflation rate will fall to less than half of its level in the last Persian year, 1399. In other words, Iran's new president has set the inflation target for 2023 at 18 percent. In addition, Raisi also intends to move inflation "toward a single-digit level" in subsequent years.

The 18-percent inflation target is already ambitious, as containing inflation, for example through a restrictive monetary policy, conflicts with plans to set the stagnant economy back on a growth track.

AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR

The Iranian automotive industry is a good example of the discrepancy between the candidates' promises and the realities of the Iranian economy. It is the second-largest industrial sector in the country and still accounts for 13 percent of all manufacturing jobs.

Raisi has pledged to break the monopoly of the three major Iranian manufacturers: Iran Khodro, Saipa, and Pars Khodro. However, during the election campaign neither he nor the other candidates took a clear position on the three-and-a-half-year ban on car imports. Iran introduced the import ban after the US imposed sanctions so that it could use its limited foreign exchange revenue in a more targeted fashion. It is debatable whether the monopoly can be disrupted unless that ban is lifted.

The second point in Raisi's plans for the automotive sector is "fair pricing" – actually not part of the state's purview in a market economy. The impact of government price controls to date became apparent in last year's financial statements from the country's three major automobile manufacturers. These indicated that the three corporations spent an average of IRR 1,220 million on each vehicle produced, although they earned on average only IRR 1,140 million per sale (circa 4,100 and 3,800 EUR). This substantial loss arose primarily due to the government's pricing policy. The new president does not yet appear to have considered liberalizing the automobile market and opening up to foreign investment and transfer of know-how.

The next few years will show whether Raisi is able to keep his promises (even if only in part). At present there is little reason to believe that he will take the sweeping steps needed to do so. Instead, there seem to be good grounds to fear these promises will after all prove to be merely a "gateway to the green garden".

CONVERGENCE AND CONTINUITY – IRAN’S REGIONAL POLICY UNDER THE RAISI PRESIDENCY

In regional policy, hardliners have already been dominating both strategy formation and implementation. Substantial changes are not to be expected under the next president.

On June 18, Iran held one of the most predictable presidential elections in the Islamic Republic’s history to determine the successor to moderate President Hassan Rouhani. As the widespread disqualification of reformist and moderate candidates led more than half of the eligible population to decide not to vote, it was no surprise that conservative cleric and Judiciary Chief Ebrahim Raisi [won](#) the election by an overwhelming majority.

Many observers rightly believe that Raisi’s victory and the complete exclusion of the moderates from key governmental institutions herald the beginning of significant changes in Iranian politics. But when it comes to Iran’s foreign policy, and especially its Middle East strategy, one should expect neither substantial policy changes nor a surprising shift in approach.

Hassan Rouhani’s eight-year presidency was marked by a [fundamental difference in the approaches to regional policy](#) between the administration and its foreign ministry on the one hand, and the hardline faction – specifically the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its affiliates – on the other. Fundamentally, the moderate camp holds a liberal view of Iranian regional policy, one based on dialogue and diplomacy. From this perspective, there is a direct link between Iran’s national interests and security and those of its neighbors. For this reason, senior officials in the Rouhani administration, including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, have repeatedly referred directly or indirectly to the idea of establishing a collective security system in the region, proposing initiatives like the Hormuz Peace Endeavor ([HOPE](#)) or a [Persian Gulf Security Forum](#) to this end.

In contrast, the hardline faction’s approach toward the Middle East is based on a fundamentally realist view that considers enhancing the country’s hard power the most important tool for maximizing national security. This approach does not rule out dialogue with other states in the region, but its proponents believe that dialogue is possible only from a position of power. Among other elements of this view is a defiant and uncompromising stance toward the United States.

At the beginning of his presidency, Rouhani sought to apply the former, liberal view to Iran’s regional policy. However, the hardliners dealt the first major blow to Rouhani’s approach by [storming](#) Saudi Arabia’s embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad in January 2016. In the following years, the US withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) – Rouhani’s most important political achievement – further weakened the position of the moderate faction in Iran’s foreign policy, especially in the region. In an interview in January 2021, Zarif [acknowledged](#) that the role of the Foreign Ministry in Iran’s regional policy had been “close to zero.” Moreover, in a controversial [interview](#) leaked to the media in April, Zarif noted that the IRGC had completely marginalized the Foreign Ministry in regional policy.

Thus, it is safe to argue that when it comes to the region, the hardline faction had been dominating both policy formation and policy implementation long before the June 18 election. If there was any doubt in this regard, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei [clarified](#) in a speech before the election that foreign policy is determined not at the Foreign Ministry but at a higher level.



A look at the positions taken by Ebrahim Raisi and political figures close to him – including the two other hardline candidates who withdrew from the race to support him – reveals that he firmly believes in the second, realist approach to Iran’s regional policy. Raisi explicitly defends Iran’s influence and involvement in the region, [considering](#) it the most important element of Iran’s power. “Iran’s regional power is more important than its defense and missile capabilities,” he says, adding that “the United States and Israel know that Iran has a high operational capacity [in the region] and that Iran has the upper hand.” Raisi also states that “today no equation [at the regional level] is formed in the region without the Islamic Republic’s consent.” Saeed Jalili and Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, two hardline politicians who are being [mentioned](#) as potential foreign ministers in Raisi’s cabinet, take an even more radical approach.

What is usually referred to as the hardline camp in Iran’s political sphere is certainly not a unified entity, and there are clear differences between different groups and figures on a variety of issues. But when it comes to foreign policy, they all seem to agree on those basic realist principles mentioned earlier. As such, Ebrahim Raisi’s victory in the presidential election will likely lead to a convergence between the administration’s foreign policy stance and those of other governmental institutions that were already controlled by the hardline faction, especially the IRGC. Indeed, given that the role of the administration and the Foreign Ministry is already limited to the implementation of policies, this means there will be continuity in Iran’s general foreign policy orientation and strategies in the region and beyond. At the same time, this fundamental consensus will cause the non-elected state institutions, specifically the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and the IRGC, to have more trust in the Foreign Ministry when it comes to implementing certain regional policies.

This, in turn, reduces the potential for friction between the administration and those institutions. In the same vein, one could expect that any regional initiatives that the administration may propose will not be hampered or sabotaged by the hardline faction – as occurred with regard to a possible rapprochement with Saudi Arabia in 2016.

At the practical level, this new trend will have several major implications. First, given that the hardline faction considers Iran’s regional involvement to be a key element of its national power, Tehran will continue to actively support the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, as well as the Islamic Republic’s allied and proxy groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This, in turn, means that Tehran will in no way be willing to supplement the nuclear agreement – the JCPOA is expected to be revived – with a regional agreement with Washington.

In other words, Iran will continue to see nuclear and regional issues as two completely separate files: for Iran, the former case is basically an issue between Iran and the United States in which other countries in the region – despite their expressed desire – play no role, while the latter must be addressed via direct talks between Tehran and its neighbors.

In fact, this process of regional dialogue has already begun: Iran and the United Arab Emirates initiated a rapprochement a few months ago. Interestingly, UAE Vice-President and Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum was among the first high-ranking regional figures to [congratulate](#) Raisi for winning the election. At the same time, the Iraqi-mediated talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia are expected to continue under Raisi. According to [Zarif](#), Saudi officials preferred to wait for the outcome of the Iranian election to continue negotiations, but they were assured that Tehran’s desire to defuse tensions with Riyadh would not diminish under the next administration. After all, it was the [SNSC](#), not the Foreign Ministry, that directed negotiations with the Saudis from the outset.

That said, it is important to bear in mind that according to the hardline faction’s logic, negotiation is meaningful only from a position of power. As such, the fact that Iran has recently started to show interest in deescalating tensions with Saudi Arabia stems primarily from the Iranian perception that Riyadh is increasingly under pressure from



Tehran and its Yemeni Houthi allies and thus has no choice but to reach some kind of agreement with the Islamic Republic. As a result, although Tehran is serious about pursuing diplomacy with Riyadh, any potential future shift in the regional balance of power to Iran's detriment could bring the two sides back to the era of tensions.

All in all, Iran's regional policy under Raisi will be a combination of continuing efforts to expand regional influence and a desire to defuse tensions with the Arab neighbors. However, the inherent contradiction in this approach between security logic and diplomatic tools could cause Iran's strategy to fail in practice.

WILL NUCLEAR TALKS IN VIENNA AND THE FATE OF THE JCPOA AFFECT IRAN'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS?

What happens on the nuclear stage is unlikely to influence who will become the next Iranian president. But the outcome of the elections will still shape Iran's tactical approach to the nuclear issue for years to come.

With presidential elections in Iran only three weeks away, questions are emerging about whether and how the development of the nuclear talks currently taking place in Vienna could affect the results of the elections, as well as how the latter could affect the nuclear issue in the future. Perhaps surprisingly, this round of elections seems detached from the nuclear negotiations, unlike the past. But their outcome is still likely to have repercussions for Iran's tactical approach to the nuclear file.

Since nuclear talks first started, back in 2003, four rounds of presidential elections have taken place in Iran. Especially the 2005 and 2013 elections, which respectively brought Mahmood Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani to power, left huge marks on Iran's nuclear diplomacy.

In 2005 Ahmadinejad won mainly because of his ability to depict himself as a man of the people, in contrast to candidates such as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, against whom he ran in the run-off and whom he accused of contributing to the corruption of the Islamic Republic's principles and economy for his own advantage. By relying on his mosques and Revolutionary Guards' networks, the hardliner managed to mobilize an unexpected level of support for himself. But nuclear talks did not feature at all in his electoral campaign and thus did not contribute to his success. Ahmadinejad's election, on the other hand, pushed Tehran to adopt a different posture in foreign policy compared to the previous reformist administration, led by President Mohammad Khatami. On the nuclear issue, this meant that Ahmadinejad implemented his preferences by removing all previous negotiators and replacing them with people with much more antagonistic views towards France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (known as the E3), the EU, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Soon after Ahmadinejad's victory, Iran progressively disengaged from talks with the E3, [reprising the nuclear activities](#) that were suspended under the previous administration. Talks with Russia, China, the European powers, and the US continued during his two terms, though no significant progress was made towards a deal or de-escalation. Instead Iran continued to advance its nuclear program, increasing the level of its enrichment and stockpiles and building an underground uranium enrichment facility, Fordow.

Rouhani's electoral victory in 2013, unlike Ahmadinejad's, was significantly linked to the nuclear talks. As a former chief negotiator on the nuclear issue during Khatami's presidency, he portrayed foreign policy and the reduction of tensions with the outside world as key to solving the country's issues, including Iran's crumbling economy.

Rouhani specifically criticized the approach that Ahmadinejad's negotiators had taken to the nuclear issue, arguing that more constructive nuclear diplomacy was necessary to strike a deal and roll back the crippling international sanctions. He rode to victory by raising the Iranian people's hopes that they would directly benefit from nuclear talks, which, through the lifting of sanctions, were meant to improve the economy. Rouhani's election, albeit not by itself, also significantly affected Iran's posture on the talks. Soon after his term started, he changed negotiators once again, bringing in experienced diplomats and placing the dossier under the leadership of Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who had served for a long time in the US.

Already in November, just three months after coming to power, the new administration managed to reach an interim agreement, known as the [Joint Plan of Action \(JPOA\)](#). After more than two years of intense negotiations, that deal ultimately led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), announced in July 2015. In 2017, Rouhani won reelection thanks to the fact that the voters believed he could (and should) finish what started – translating the nuclear deal into concrete economic dividends for the Iranian people.

Four years after, with talks in Vienna still in the news cycle, Iranians do not have the same level of interest, let alone hope, that progress on the nuclear issue could actually deliver tangible economic improvement. Even when all parties fully implemented the deal, Iran was not able to fully integrate into the global financial system: many banks and companies were still hesitant to engage with Tehran for fear of US penalties – [dashing the Iranian people's remaining expectations of rapid economic recovery](#). The prospect that the JCPOA would improve the Iranian economy faded even further once the US withdrew from the deal in 2018, triggering the resumption of sanctions and the adoption of President Trump's maximum pressure campaign. Despite the Iranian decision to remain a fully compliant party to the deal for more than a year, the remaining JCPOA parties did not manage to take enough steps to prevent Iran from falling into a deep recession.

With all this in mind, it is thus unlikely that what happens in Vienna will determine whom Iranians will vote for on June 18 – or whether they vote at all. This will be the case even if progress towards the resumption of the JCPOA is made and a compromise reached before the elections. In order for the positive effects of lifting sanctions to actually trickle down into the Iranian economy, different steps will need to be taken from those adopted in 2016, and even in the best-case scenario these changes will take time. Three weeks will not be enough time for an announcement from Vienna to translate into tangible economic benefits that the Iranian people will be able to savor and trust.

Nevertheless, some presidential candidates might still decide to center their campaigns on their stance on the nuclear issue. Moderate conservative Ali Larijani, has for instance echoed some of the slogans adopted by Rouhani in 2013, claiming that successful nuclear

negotiation could “[provide breathing space for the country's economy](#)”.

However, these slogans, years after they were initially made and without the country's economy having made substantial progress, are unlikely to encourage voter turnout or trigger a sudden wave of hope for the prospects of economic recovery. This is even more the case now that he has been now disqualified from running by the Guardian Council, with other candidates likely even less interested in what happens in Vienna.

What is more likely, instead, is that, once again, the outcome of the presidential elections will affect Iran's tactical approach to foreign policy, particularly when it comes to the nuclear issue. Of course, the national consensus and the position of the supreme leader does much to determine what Iran does on the foreign policy stage. But even an establishment figure such as President Rouhani has argued in the run-up to the upcoming elections that his administration succeeded in every negotiation it engaged in over the past eight years, whereas previous ones (read Ahmadinejad's) came back from each one “with a resolution against the country”. Thus, it matters in this context who is holding the Iranian presidency.

While Iranians are thus unlikely to vote on the basis of what candidates say or think about the nuclear issue or on what announcement (if any) is made between now and June 18 in Vienna: Their votes (or lack thereof) are likely to shape the country's posture towards foreign policy in general, and the nuclear issue in particular, for years to come.

ECONOMIC DISTRESS AND VOTER TURNOUT IN THE IRANIAN ELECTIONS

Expectations of low voter turnout have overshadowed Iran's presidential election, with some observers claiming that Iran's leadership is facing a legitimacy crisis. But voter apathy may have more mundane causes related to the country's economic situation.


Iran's presidential election, which is taking place at a critical juncture for the country, is being overshadowed by expectations of [low voter turnout](#). For several months, political commentators and pollsters in Iran have been noting high levels of voter apathy. With the election process now formally underway, most of the candidates who have registered are uninspiring, and the few who might be able to mobilize voters are unlikely to be allowed to run by the Guardian Council. Low turnout seems assured.

But perhaps low turnout was also to be expected. Low turnout is a commonplace political response to economic shocks. Iran is now emerging from three years of economic crisis, spurred by the reimposition of US secondary sanctions in May 2018 and compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Voters are predominantly concerned with the country's economic situation, marked by high inflation, high unemployment, and growing economic inequality. But at the same time, voters are skeptical that the government has the means to address these problems and are therefore doubtful that their votes will make much of a difference.

In a poll conducted in March by the [Iranian Students](#) Polling Agency (ISPA), a well-respected pollster, respondents were asked what issues should top the next government's agenda. Notably, barely 10 percent of respondents pointed to national security as the key priority, suggesting that figures such as former IRGC Brigadier General and Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan will not be able to rely on their national security experience to win over voters. Candidates will be judged based on their ability to address three main issues, all of which pertain to Iran's economic situation.

A plurality of respondents to the ISPA poll – 31 percent – indicated that “justice” should be the priority. While concerns around injustice encompass a range of issues including income inequality and the urban/rural divide, corruption has become perhaps the most highly charged political issue in Iran. Much of the voter apathy stems from the perception that the political class is principally interested [in self-enrichment](#). Candidates such as Ebrahim Raisi, who as the current head of the judiciary has portrayed himself as a crusader against corruption, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former president who has cast himself as a populist champion who will speak truth to power, offer two very different visions of how to make the government more just (Ahmadinejad has registered for the election but is also likely to be disqualified). But the issue of corruption is not merely about laws and their enforcement. Corruption has become politically salient because of the general economic malaise. Ordinary Iranians are increasingly outraged by kickbacks, nepotism, misappropriations, and arbitrage as their own economic fortunes worsen.

Measures for the government to address these underlying economic challenges were also among the priorities highlighted in the survey. An equal proportion of respondents – 20 percent – pointed to improving relations with foreign countries and supporting domestic production as key priorities. These responses reflect the two visions for how Iran can best grow its economy. On one hand, there is the aim of achieving a diplomatic breakthrough in order to secure sanctions relief. On the other hand, there is the aim of decreasing dependence on the global economy by creating what Iranian leaders call a “resistance economy.”



While politicians often present these approaches as dueling philosophies for development, in reality there is a growing consensus among Iranian policymakers that a combination of approaches is necessary. The development of domestic manufacturing is critical, but it cannot be achieved without the technology transfers and investment made possible by the lifting of sanctions, which in turn would enable greater growth in lucrative exports for Iranian industries. This emergent consensus has been reflected in the ways that candidates have tried to appeal to voters by highlighting their commitment to both approaches. The governor of Iran's central bank, Abdolnasser Hemmati, is making a bid for the presidency, hoping to parlay his success in improving Iran's economic situation since taking office in 2018 shortly after President Donald Trump reimposed sanctions on Iran. Saeed Mohammad, who has registered for the election but is also likely to be disqualified, [has underlined](#) his experience in "circumventing sanctions" as the head of Khatam al-Anbiya, a major engineering and construction firm controlled by the IRGC. While Hemmati rose to prominence as a key figure of Iran's economic diplomacy, visiting countries like China and Iraq to advance Iran's interests, Mohammad has vowed to use "international capacities" to pursue the removal of sanctions, citing the Iran nuclear deal as an agreement that the Iranian government is committed to uphold.

Priorities aside, Iranian voters are skeptical that their vote matters. In the same ISPA poll, 28 percent of respondents stated that voter participation can have a significant impact in addressing the challenges facing the country. But an equal proportion – 27 percent – stated that voter participation would have no impact whatsoever. The expected low voter turnout has been described by [observers inside](#) and [outside of Iran](#) as a threat to the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic itself, with voter apathy associated with the apparent demise of the reformist bloc and the diminished prospect of political and economic reform more generally. This diagnosis may be accurate when looking to the concerns of the middle class, which sees the political establishment as sclerotic. The presidents who exemplified middle class priorities for Iran – Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani – were thwarted by the wider political system, leaving most of their economic and social agendas unimplemented. But the issue of apathy extends beyond middle class voters to the working class and rural electorate that more conservative candidates have readily mobilized in past years.

As Kevan Harris and Daniel Tavana identified in their [major 2016 survey](#), 87 percent of Iranians "do not closely identify with a national faction," despite the fact that 75 percent of Iranians indicated that they are "interested in politics." Iranians clearly have strong views on what the priorities should be for their government, and they remain interested in politics, yet they do not widely identify with political factions and are increasingly skeptical that taking part in elections can impact government policy. Taken together, these facts lend the issue of voter apathy in Iran a much more quotidian aspect than the doubts about legitimacy portrayed in foreign media.

There is a significant body of social science research suggesting that voter turnout is depressed in the aftermath of economic crises, particularly those induced by an [exogenous shock](#). Evidence from around the globe suggests that economic distress does not make people less political, and in Iran rolling protests and worker mobilizations did increase as economic conditions worsened. Still, such distress does appear to [undermine confidence in government](#) and contribute to a general sense of hopelessness, making it more difficult to mobilize voters during elections.

Measuring this phenomenon in Iran would be a worthy, but challenging project for social scientists. Iran did not experience significant economic recessions between the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the imposition of financial sanctions in 2012, when Iran's economy shrank 7 percent. While [turnout fell](#) from around 85% to 76% between the 2009 and 2013 elections, part of that decline may be attributable to the political fallout from Ahmadinejad's disputed victory in 2009. The fact that turnout did not fall more precipitously between 2009 and 2013 suggests that dramatically lower turnout this year would more likely reflect skepticism about government capacity after three years of deep economic recession than concerns around legitimacy.



Should the Iranian public continue to perceive the country's executive and parliament as inept and incapable of addressing the country's fundamental economic challenges, its doubts around capacity will no doubt slide further towards doubts about legitimacy. But the likely restoration of the Iran nuclear deal and the country's tentative post-pandemic recovery has created a short window for technocratic leadership to restore some confidence in the connection between political participation and government policy, as was achieved fleetingly during the first term of the Rouhani administration. Those Iranian voters who vote in this election will not be doing so as "reformists" nor "hardliners", and they are unlikely to select their candidate out of allegiance to a bloc. Their votes will be issued in the hope that whoever is elected will be able to alleviate economic distress.

CLEAR-EYED PRAGMATISM: QATAR AND THE COMING AND GOING OF IRANIAN ELECTIONS

Qatar is set to continue its policy of pragmatic engagement even if a hardliner takes over the presidency in Tehran. Constructive relations with Iran are part and parcel of Doha's strategy to hedge its foreign relationships.


Qatar's outlook towards the June 18 presidential elections in Iran is characterized by the same pragmatism that has defined the two countries' relations for decades. Both Qatar's emir, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, and the country's foreign minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, have developed personal ties to Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and would have worked exceedingly well with a hypothetical Zarif administration, but Zarif is not running for office. However, like other pragmatic players in the region, Doha could work with either a reformist and a conservative administration in Tehran and remains clear-eyed about the continued influence and power of the "deep state" institutions, including the office of the supreme leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Decision-makers in Qatar are looking closely at the former, the highest institution in the country, in part to identify which candidate Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei supports. Everything seems to point to Ebrahim Raisi, a conservative and Principlist politician whom Khamenei himself appointed chief justice in March 2019. Doha has not yet had much opportunity to engage directly with Raisi. But it stands ready to do so by leveraging existing institutional ties and personal connections, especially if the rumors that Raisi is well placed to succeed the 82-year-old Khamenei after his death intensify. In fact, Qatar has been preparing for a hardline government in Tehran for months already: reformists appeared to be in an increasingly difficult political position even before Iran's powerful election-vetting body, the Guardian Council, approved only seven candidates, all conservatives.

Common interests – first and foremost, their shared sovereignty over the South Pars/North Dome gas field, the largest in the world – have pushed Qatar and Iran towards dialogue and cooperation since the 1990s. While its proximity to a large neighbor that is mired in an economic crisis and carries out a disruptive foreign policy inevitably represents a risk for Qatar, engagement with Tehran is also viewed as an opportunity in Doha.

Under the framework of a "hedging" strategy, engaging with Tehran can be an effective way for Qatar to counterbalance the risks posed by other actors, including fellow Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This is why former emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani invited then Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to attend a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) meeting in Doha in December 2007, much to the dismay of other GCC leaders, and started conversations on the security of borders and critical infrastructure as well as potential joint military exercises shortly afterwards. In fact, the emir and his powerful prime minister, Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, were the two major architects of Qatar's policy of cautious engagement with Iran, successfully passing on this legacy to Emir Tamim in 2013. Hamad bin Jassim's shrewd approach, in particular, was a masterful and yet maverick balancing act that even exposed him to accusations of collusion with the Iranian regime from Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Still, this hedging mechanism proved its effectiveness when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE closed all borders with Qatar in June 2017. Transiting via Iran's airspace and territorial waters then became vital for Qatar to be able to escape full isolation and continue exporting its energy resources, the single most important source of income for



the Qatari government – and thus, arguably, its major lifeline throughout the crisis. Iran also provided shipments to help Doha avert a food security crisis.

Even with the Gulf crisis officially over since the January 2021 al-Ula declaration, Qatar has no urgency to undo the geopolitical network developed over the past few years, and it has many reasons to continue its policy of pragmatic engagement with its neighbor to the East.

The key question for Doha remains how much diplomatic continuity there will be under the next Iranian administration. While Doha assumes that there will be a degree of strategic continuity regardless of who governs in Tehran, there are concerns that engagement with the West may not be part of it. On the other hand, if indeed it makes sense for Qatar to maintain constructive working relations with Iran, its ties to Iranian rivals like the United States (US) and Saudi Arabia remain of unquestionably strategic value. The host of the regional headquarter of the US Central Command at the al-Udeid military base, Qatar has for decades considered the US an off-shore geopolitical and security guarantor. While the Saudi-Emirati policies on Qatar have arguably posed the gravest threat to the country's stability in contemporary times, the depth of historical, political, social, and cultural ties in the Arabian Peninsula is binding.

In this context, Qatar regards regional and international escalation as counterproductive and even dangerous, given the risk that it could pay the price for rising tensions. To avert these risks, Doha engages in careful diplomacy around Tehran – and it continued to do so even in face of the difficulties and sensitivities associated with the “maximum pressure” agenda of the former US administration led by Donald Trump. For instance, when a US airstrike killed IRGC General Qassem Suleimani in January 2020, Qatar hastily sent emissaries to reassure Iran that the strike was not launched from al-Udeid and ensure that Iran would not retaliate by striking Qatari soil. These elements explain why Qatar offered its good offices with Iran to facilitate de-escalation with the US and in the region.

Qatar has supported the Iranian nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), since it was first negotiated and signed in 2015. Now that the Biden administration in the US is working to revive the deal, Qatar has repeatedly extended offers to help mediate between the sides, including as a way of enhancing its own politico-diplomatic clout. This offer has not been taken up so far, perhaps because there are some direct ties between the two administrations in Washington D.C. and Tehran and the European Union can also effectively mediate. However, the Qatari offer may be revisited under a Raisi administration, since Raisi has a generally hardline disposition, is skeptical of engagement with the West, and has been on the US sanctions list since 2019 for human rights violations. This is, of course, if the Iranian side can overcome its own lingering mistrust vis-à-vis the inherent ambiguity of Qatar's friends-of-all posture.

A similar trust deficit, from more than one side, has so far also prevented Qatar from mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia or facilitating the regional security dialogue that Doha advocates for to increase regional stability. There is a wide gulf of perceptions and positions between Doha on one side and Riyadh or Abu Dhabi on the other. This is especially true with anything concerning Iran because Doha is not trusted to back up strategic Saudi interests on issues such as Iran's ballistic missile capabilities and the future of its regional proxy network. On the other hand, as long as the geopolitical balance of the region remains volatile, Doha is guaranteed to be a relevant interlocutor for the Gulf monarchies and, especially, for Iran. This value is linked to its special ties to Turkey, as well as its role as key mediator in Afghanistan's conflicts and in other theaters in the wider Middle East and Africa region.

In addition, once the JCPOA is back in play, any new administration in Iran will be interested in preserving and expanding cooperation with Qatar on domains such as energy, trade, and investment. Iranian exports to Qatar jumped from around \$60 million between 2016 and 2017 to \$250 million between 2017 and 2018, indicating significant potential. In recent years, the two sides have revived the Joint Economic Cooperation Commission that worked on procedures to facilitate import and export flows. Qatar has also been supporting Iran throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by sending shipments of medicines and medical aids into the country.



Overall, while the upcoming presidential elections in Iran might trigger significant political developments within the country, they will probably have a more limited impact on the Islamic Republic's relations with regional actors that have grown accustomed to navigating the Iranian system. Qatar certainly falls into this category. It has long pursued a policy of pragmatic engagement with Iran and will most probably continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

THE END OF A DÉTENTE: TURKISH-IRANIAN RELATIONS AFTER THE IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Following a period of exceptionally warm relations, Turkey and Iran are now on a collision course. The outcome of the elections will not alter this course.

As Rouhani's second and final term nears its end, the relations between Ankara and Tehran are also entering a new phase: Turkey is getting ready for more conflictual relations with Iran. However, this is not only due to the upcoming change in the Iranian presidency, which will probably be won by a more conservative figure, but also due to more systemic changes and regional re-alignments. The factors that made relations more cooperative over the last four to five years are changing and giving way to more conflict.

Historically, Turkish-Iranian relations have always been mixed, featuring periods of both cooperation and confrontation. The two countries created a diplomatic tradition in which the relations swung like a pendulum between limited cooperation and controlled rivalry. Economics has been the main pillar of these relations, particularly during the times of rivalry.


During the Rouhani era, notably, Turkish-Iranian relations reached an unprecedented level of cooperation. Four factors were central to this. First, rising anti-Western sentiment in Turkey. In order to galvanize public support, Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan played on nationalist sentiment and increasingly pushed a foreign policy discourse based on anti-Westernism, aiming to create a rally-around-the-flag effect in domestic politics. As Turkey inched away from its Western allies, it became easier to create more friendly relations with Iran.

Second, the emergence of the Astana process in Syria. During Rouhani's first term, Syria was the main problem in the bilateral relationship between Turkey and Iran. Whereas Turkey aimed to topple the Assad regime, Iran (along with Russia) was the main force that kept Assad in power. However, towards the end of 2016, Turkey's priorities in Syria started to change as it became clear that Turkey had failed in its effort to topple Assad. The result was the emergence of the trilateral Astana system that enabled close cooperation between Russia, Turkey, and Iran on their activities in Syria.

The third driver of cooperation was Northern Iraq: both countries rejected the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) referendum for independence in 2017.

As important as these three factors were, the main reason for the warmer relationship between Iran and Turkey was the competition with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the region. As the Saudi-Emirati axis took an increasingly assertive foreign policy line, seeking to dominate the region, Turkey and Iran came closer to each other. This was most evident during the Qatari blockade that started in 2017. Both Iran and Turkey were targets of the blockade against Qatar, and both rapidly sided with the tiny Gulf country, enabling it to resist the pressure from its more powerful neighbors.

Today, these factors are changing and will continue to change regardless of who wins the Iranian presidency. On a general level, Turkey is readjusting its foreign policy. It became clear that the anti-Western rhetoric used for domestic consumption has reached a level that has become too costly in foreign affairs. More significantly, the departure of Donald Trump, who gave Erdogan a blank check, is also pushing Turkey to readjust. In the Biden era, Turkey nee-



ds to address the contentious issues with the US as well as with US allies in the region. Currently, Turkey is seeking a rapprochement with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Israel. While only small progress has been made, and solely with regard to Egypt, this policy of rapprochement with pro-Western regimes in the region will eventually undermine the honeymoon going on between Turkey and Iran. Although such a shift is independent of who occupies the Iranian presidency, the arrival of a more conservative president in Iran will only accelerate it. Conservatives have a higher threat perception with regard to the Turkish rapprochement with pro-Western regimes in the region. Moreover, just like Turkey, the Saudi-UAE axis is also affected by the departure of Trump. Having lost the blank check they received from Trump, those countries are already starting to act with more restraint. Thus there no longer will be a “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” situation between Iran and Turkey.

Finally, Iran’s significance in the Astana process is decreasing as the process increasingly turns into a Turkish-Russian collaboration – or more significantly a personal bargain between Putin and Erdogan. In this regard the transfer of the presidency in Iran will not change anything because Iranian policy in Syria is designed and shaped by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) rather than the presidency or the foreign ministry.

Aside from these changes in external circumstances, the policies of the two countries are also directly at odds in two other contexts: in Iraq and the Caucasus. In the Caucasus, Turkey stepped up its collaboration with Azerbaijan to a higher level of military cooperation during the Azeri-Armenian war on Nagorno-Karabakh in October 2020. The Azeri issue is always a latent but sensitive topic in Iranian politics. In this context, the two countries already came face to face in December 2020 when Erdogan recited a nationalist poem in Baku that called for the union of the two Azerbaijan, i.e., the Azerbaijan Republic and the Azerbaijan region of Iran. Turkey’s increased engagement and military involvement in the region will continue to bedevil the relationship. Since this is an issue of national security, and given that there is broad consensus among different political factions in Iran on this topic, the Iranian stance will not be shaped by who sits in the position of president. Hence once again, we will observe that developments on this front will not be affected by the upcoming elections.

Iraq is another front where limited cooperation (against the Kurdish independence attempts in 2017) has given way to rivalry. Turkey is increasingly entering Northern Iraq in its battle against the PKK, a Kurdish insurgency group recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the EU, and the US. At the moment the mountainous regions of Northern Iraq along the Turkish-Iraqi border are effectively under Turkish military control, and Turkey is trying to deepen its military presence in the region. A new power equation has emerged in which Turkey is siding with the KRG against the Iranian-backed militias who are effectively allied with the PKK. As Iran is keen on preserving its gains in Iraq, a standoff between the two countries seems inevitable. Moreover, the new president will have little say on Iran’s activities in Iraq, as this is, just like Syria, almost exclusively the domain of the IRGC. Yet in both Syria and Iraq, a hardliner-conservative president more aligned with the IRGC would probably create a more coherent approach on the Iranian side.

All in all, relations between Iran and Turkey are set to decline in the coming years. In this context, however, the elections will only have a minimal impact. The changing regional context is forcing the two countries in opposite directions – irrespective of who wields presidential power in Iran. Moreover, in Iranian foreign policy making the president is only one among many actors, and their role is particularly limited on issues pertaining to national security. Thus a conservative-hardline presidency in Iran, as seems to be on the horizon, will only marginally contribute to the overall deterioration of bilateral relations.

Nevertheless, this will remain a limited rivalry. As two of the main states of the region with roughly similar capacities, Iran and Turkey will work to keep any clashes under control. Moreover, if the American sanctions against Iran are removed or eased, trade will once again be the main pillar of the relationship during a period of rivalry.

VOTERS AND REGIME HARDLINERS FACE OFF

As Iran's presidential elections approach, voters face a dilemma. Regime hardliners, eager to solidify their power, face no such quandaries.

Consider the agony of Iranian voters as they contemplate their dismaying options ahead of the June 18 presidential elections. They face a limited set of choices, even by the already dismal standards of the Islamic Republic.

Over the last quarter century, Iranians have devised a variety of strategies in attempts to bring about peaceful political change in the country. But they have repeatedly failed.

The de facto coalition of the middle classes, women, youth, and minorities – which make up the nation's silenced majority – flooded polling stations at the 1997 and 2001 presidential and 2000 parliamentary elections. Turnout was 80% in 1997, and 67% in 2001.


But it was mostly for naught. Hardline extremists embedded within the institutions of Iran's deep state thwarted the agenda of the reformist president Mohammed Khatami and the like-minded Second Khordad Front, which dominated the parliament that voters had elected.

“The middle class was empowered in the early years of Mohammad Khatami's presidency [in the late 1990s]; they thought they could have a say in the country's structure, and they could reform the system by voting for competent politicians,” said one writer based in Tehran. “But as the crackdown intensified and the hardliners did all they could to silence the voice of reformists, and after Khatami's inaction and weakness in his second term in office, the voters got frustrated.”

Those same Iranian voters largely stayed away from the polls in 2005, disgusted by the prospect of electing Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani into office once more. Turnout dropped to 59%. But the result they wound up with was even worse. Not only did President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad intensify repression, roll back freedoms, and torpedo the economy, he also badly sullied Iranians' reputation abroad with toxic speeches and gestures.

In the weeks before the 2009 elections, Iranians waving the green colors of candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi's campaign took to the streets filled with civic pride, hoping to oust Ahmadinejad. Turnout on election day was reported at 80 percent. And after regime stalwarts blatantly rigged the election to grant Ahmadinejad an improbable, lopsided victory, citizens peacefully took to the streets again, only to be met with teargas, truncheons, and live fire.

Defying their own skepticism, they rallied around the moderate pragmatist Hassan Rouhani in 2013 and 2017, granting him two tremendous victories over hardliners, each time with turnout above 70%. Rouhani has never been a reformist; he is truly a man of the system. If the collection of murky regime enforcers, IRGC commanders, intelligence officers, and fanatical supporters of velayat-e-faqih grouped around the clergy in Qom and the supreme leader's complex of institutions could not countenance Khatami (who also considered running in the 2013 elections), perhaps they would allow the centrist Rouhani to open up political space, repair relations with world powers, and bring a measure of the rule of law to the country?



No, the voters' show of political maturity and temperance was met by cold indifference. Khamenei and like-minded apparatchiks in the judiciary and the security establishment tightened repression, refused to open the country's books to any standard of transparency, and generally halted Rouhani's modest, reformist-lite agenda.

They were aided by Donald Trump, whose policy of maximum pressure and sabotage of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action discredited those within the establishment arguing for rapprochement or at least a measure of peaceful coexistence with the United States.

All of which brings Iran to this election. It was no surprise to Iran watchers that the outspoken Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was hounded out of the race with leaks of an audio interview and a smear campaign propagated through hardline media. It was also not a shock that the reformist Mostafa Tajzadeh, who spent time in prison following the 2009 uprising, was rejected by the Council of Guardians.

That body of 12 clerics and jurists has become an increasingly blunt instrument of regime hardliners, its agenda clearly reflective of the extreme elements within the Islamic Republic's elite. With Khamenei over 80 years old, hardliners likely see the election as a high-stakes opportunity to anoint a successor and shape Iran's future.

But by excluding even former parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani, ostensibly on the grounds that his daughter Fatemeh Ardeshir-Larijani lives and works in the United States, the regime has made it crystal clear that even a dull, pragmatic conservative to the right of President Hassan Rouhani is no longer acceptable.

The candidates palatable to the middle class who were allowed to run – Central Bank governor Abdolnasser Hemmati and former Khatami youth and sports maestro Mohsen Mehralizadeh – lack not only charisma but also popular support and knowhow. Mehralizadeh would be a weaker, less enlightened version of Khatami; Hemmati, an even more toothless Rouhani without his institutional savvy and backing. Iranians know it.

"The people I know won't vote," said one reformist journalist in Tehran. "They don't want their vote to give legitimacy to the election. We all know it's phony numbers. We know what's going on here. It's a facade for the outside world."


State television is scheduling a series of pre-recorded debates for the first days of June and has allotted 30 minutes of airtime to each of the seven approved candidates. Broadcast outlets have been devoting heavy coverage to the elections.

Hemmati, in a television interview, promised to create 1 million new jobs in his first year in office, even as he oversaw one of the steepest economic declines in Iran's history. In his interview, Mohsen Rezai, a former Revolutionary Guard commander and regular presidential contender, promised a five-fold increase in monthly cash subsidies, a scheme that would almost certainly exacerbate inflation.

But strong criticism and loud calls to boycott the vote have emerged even from within the establishment, including from Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of the Islamic Republic's founder, as well as from former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"The disgruntled middle class wants to see change and improvement in various spheres, especially in the economy," says Mohammad Hashemi, a researcher and writer in Tehran. "But the main problem here is the absence of a strong and charismatic candidate. If [the middle class] doesn't vote, a hardliner or conservative politician will become president, just as happened in the latest parliamentary elections."

There is a brash, spiteful arrogance in the way that the Council of Guardians rejected the candidacies of regime stalwart Larijani or well-known reformist Tajzadeh. They are trying to tilt the playing field to clear the way for Kham-



menei's apparent anointed successor and fellow Mashhad native Raisi to win the elections. And they're not being particularly subtle about it.

The brazenness is in part born of the upcoming succession struggle. Hardliners will need someone to rally around once Khamenei passes, and Raisi, a black-turbaned, ultra-conservative cleric and true believer in velayat-e-faqih, meets the job requirements.

But after surviving a marathon of challenges that included several rounds of nationwide anti-regime protests, four years of Donald Trump and his maximum pressure campaign, an oil price slump, and the devastating and ongoing impact of the coronavirus, Khamenei and those around him must feel rather strong.

The 2009 protests and their aftershocks revealed the chasm between the regime and the middle class. And the protests that began in late 2017, in which mostly lower- and lower-middle-class demonstrators from far-flung provinces that they considered the base of the regime chanted against the supreme leader himself, revealed the profound anger harbored in the hearts of the Iranian public.

"Economic problems, lack of freedom, human rights violations, and international isolation are what have destroyed the expectations of the middle class," said a writer in Tehran. "Not a glimmer of hope for change has remained in Iran."

Khamenei and his adjutants may no longer labor under the illusion that the Islamic Republic enjoys much popular support. That may be why he and his allies are so aggressively promoting Raisi just four years after voters handed him a humiliating landslide defeat against Rouhani. Hardliners within the clergy and the security apparatus are mobilizing around Raisi, a 60-year-old jurist who has served for the last two years as head of the judiciary.

Iran's election could yet yield a surprise. Voters could rally around Hemmati at the last moment, though he does not appear to have even Rouhani's full-throated endorsement. Mehralizadeh, the sole reformist among the seven candidates, could also outperform expectations. It was in the closing days of Iran's 2013 elections that a social media blitz drew supporters to Rouhani.

If Iranians do end up voting for Hemmati or Mehralizadeh, they are unlikely to do so out of support for their agenda or hope for change. More likely it would be a vote solely out of spite for Khamenei. Just as the supreme leader thwarted their hopes of bringing a measure of democracy or even good governance to Iran, voters may decide to sabotage his aspirations to elevate Raisi, an alleged human rights violator who is on the sanctions lists of the United States, and who was named as one of the jurists responsible for the mass executions of thousands at Evin Prison in the late 1980s.

Khamenei's arrogance and blithe disregard for voters' aspirations shows that the masks are off in the Islamic Republic. Khamenei, flanked by the uniformed armed forces and hordes of shadowy pro-regime paramilitaries, is sneering menacingly at Iranians. At the very least, Iranians can sneer back.

STRATEGIC CONTINUITY — THE PARADOX OF POLITICAL CHANGE IN IRAN

The way is paved for a hardliner victory, and the Iranian elections seem like a done deal. Nevertheless, Brussels and the EU member states should prepare for an Iran that, rhetoric aside, continues to have an interest in constructive relations with Europe.

The key moment of this year's presidential elections in Iran will not be the day of voting on June 18th. In fact, it already lies in the past, on May 25th, when the Guardian Council's decision on the vetting of the candidates was announced by the interior ministry. Contrary to all expectations, all the well-known reformist and moderate candidates were banned from the race.

Eshagh Jahangiri, currently the vice president in the Rouhani administration and known to be an effective debater, was disqualified. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who enjoys a certain popularity with the Iranian public, was not in a position to be a candidate due to leaks showing he nurtured unfavorable views of the Revolutionary Guards.

Perhaps most surprisingly, however, another familiar figure in Iranian politics was also disqualified: the conservative Ali Larijani. In Tehran, the speculation about the reason for his exclusion is mushrooming. A former chairman of the Majlis and close adviser to the supreme leader, Ali Larijani had probably requested (and received) Ali Khamenei's personal green light before presenting his bid for the candidacy. His exclusion by the Guardian Council suggests that the supreme leader changed his mind. Why? Was it related to the situation of Ali Larijani's brother, Sadeq, himself a former head of the judiciary system and a member of the Guardian Council? Sadeq Larijani is believed to have ambitions to succeed the supreme leader when the time comes.


Another possible explanation lies in a fear, felt by Ali Khamenei and his associates, that Ali Larijani was slowly moving into the direction of the moderates and reformists. They were not prepared to take the risk of having another "moderate" administration in the next few years, when the succession of the supreme leader could come up as an additional challenge in already challenging times, characterized by massive competition between the political elite over the future course of the Islamic Republic.

A variation of this last theory highlights the divisions inside the "conservative" or "Principlists" camp: that Ali Khamenei might have not had the final word in this specific instance.

IRANIAN POLITICS AT AN INFLECTION POINT

In any case, it is clear now that Ebrahim Raisi, the head of Iran's judiciary, is left as the only strong candidate among a cast of minor figures generally unknown to the public. One of his competitors, Central Bank President Abdolnaser Hemmati, is a competent technocrat and could of course reveal himself to be a great politician, but this is unlikely given how little time is left in the campaign. Moreover, Hemmati has no political power base of his own.

Raisi is a jurist with deep links to the security apparatus and a dark legacy of repressing popular movements, most notoriously in the 1988 mass executions of political prisoners. A staunch conservative, he is being groomed as Kha-



Khamenei's heir as supreme leader. In 2017, he made an unsuccessful first bid to be elected president, losing to Rouhani. Still, his presidential campaign established him as a well-known political figure at the national level. The leadership of the Islamic Republic apparently wants to ensure that, this time, Raisi will not end up in second place again. The presidency, it is widely assumed, would be the springboard for Raisi to become the supreme leader one day.

Such speculation aside: the fact is that for the first time since 1989 an Iranian presidential election will take place with no real options for the voters – to the dismay, by the way, of some conservative voices. This will break the rule that prevailed until now: the Guardian Council selects candidates but ensures there is genuine competition, giving voters a real choice within the framework of the Islamic Republic.

Several preliminary lessons can be drawn from this evolution. The most troubling one is that the current leadership appears to no longer care about public opinion. Voter turnout is expected to be low. This will amplify the disconnect between the bulk of the urbanized middle class and the regime, which may result in a (further) deterioration of the Islamic Republic's legitimacy.

One may have the impression that the current leadership is taking this deficit of legitimacy as a given. Its own survival appears to be more important than the trappings of pluralism in the Islamic Republic. If this manifests itself in the upcoming years, we would witness an important inflection point in the history of the Islamic Republic, a shift towards even less room for political competition and even greater suppression of popular demands.


To a certain degree, this would amount to a kind of “normalization” to regional standards, with the Islamic Republic aligning itself with more classic authoritarian regimes – in the Iranian case with a religious-military caste at the top. One cannot believe that, given the history of political activism in the country, such an evolution would bode well for the stability and prosperity of Iran in the long term.

EUROPE AND THE PARADOX OF POLITICAL CHANGE IN IRAN

The paradox, however, is that this inflection point in the nature of the Islamic Republic may have little effect on Tehran's foreign policy. In fact, Iran's strategy is dominated by geopolitical realities and realpolitik considerations. European powers, especially France, Germany, and the UK (the E3), should base their policies towards Iran on this premise.

In the current situation, the talks in Vienna on the nuclear issue may or may not lead to a compromise before the Iranian election. Ultimately, only the supreme leader will decide whether such a compromise is acceptable, at this time or later. At any rate, the signals coming from Iran suggest that even the hardliners understand that the dismal state of the economy, which was exacerbated by the pandemic, demands a concerted effort to get a removal or at least an alleviation of the US sanctions.

Hence, whoever is the next president in Iran, there should be room for negotiations. It is even possible that President Raisi might take a special interest in reviving the JCPOA in order to compensate for his deficit of legitimacy and to boost his popularity – in the context of an Iranian system which will be more homogeneous than it has been for years. Nevertheless, the challenge for the Europeans, de facto honest brokers in the current Vienna talks, will be the same as today: to find the right balance in packaging a solution that both Tehran and Washington can live with. Beyond this, Europe should also take another factor into consideration. While Iran was under heavy sanctions over the last few years, the country's leadership had the opportunity to test the reliability of Russia and China, which have been presented as an alternative to the West. Tehran pretends that it is entering a new era of cooperation with China through a seemingly gigantic strategic deal reached between the two countries. In this context, Irani



ans also insist that the Europeans have been hugely disappointing in the face of the Trump's maximum pressure strategy.

But the EU and E3 would be well advised to take such accounts with a grain of salt. The European assumption should rather be that the Iranian leadership – including the conservatives and the representatives of the increasingly powerful religious-military caste – will maintain their capacity to assess the strategic balance of forces.

Iran's leaders are certainly aware of the growing polarization between Russia and China on one hand and the United States and its allies on the other. They may also realize the new assertiveness of countries like Turkey. For Tehran's decision-makers, the prospect of being totally aligned with and dependent on the Chinese and the Russians is not an attractive option: it would force Iran to give up its traditional objective of strategic independence, encapsulated in the revolutionary slogan "neither East nor West."

Against this backdrop, whoever is the next president and whatever the evolution of the regime, Tehran should continue to have an interest in close working relations with the Europeans.

How to exploit this interest should be the subject of deep strategic thinking in European capitals. A renewal of trade relations should come with a deeper political dialogue with Tehran as well as more contacts with civil society. On the economic front, specific issues such as the greening of the economy should be prioritized. One option could be for the Europeans to coordinate their approach with the Asian democracies – India, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and others – which in any case will play a part in reintegrating Iran in the international community – provided of course that the new Iranian leaders accept the JCPOA as the basis for European-Iranian relations. An "Indo-Pacific-European" joint approach to Iran, while not creating too much distance from Washington, would be a smart way to show Iran that there is an alternative to the China/US competition.

A CRITICAL JUNCTURE: AN EMIRATI PERSPECTIVE ON IRAN'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are very directly affected by the fate of Iranian politics – and thus by the outcome of the upcoming presidential elections. In moving forward, the United Nations should sponsor an initiative at the regional level, with the ultimate goal of bringing Iran back into the fold of the international community.

The upcoming Iranian presidential elections on June 18 are arguably one of the key political milestones since the revolution of 1979. Having taken control of parliament and successfully weakened and dismantled the moderate camp, conservatives are making extra efforts to take control of the presidency in this round of competition, while moderates are trying to stay in power and preserve their control over the executive branch.

This election campaign is taking place at a time when Iran is at a critical juncture in terms of its relations with the international community. It comes amid efforts to revive the nuclear deal and in the wake of Iran's signing of a strategic cooperation agreement with China.


In important ways, these global developments also affect Tehran's relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Whatever the outcome of the elections, the nuclear negotiations, and Iran-China talks: Iran's immediate neighborhood is going to be affected the most. The Gulf states, therefore, face the challenge of devising their own initiatives towards Iran with a view to resolving tensions at the regional level.

Against this backdrop, it is important to bear in mind that the elections also come at a time when every political faction is intensely preparing for the possibly imminent passing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Whichever faction secures the presidency in June will have the opportunity to shape Iran's future in a four-year period that could determine Iran's relations with the outside world and define the post-Khamenei era.

The added importance of these elections explains the unprecedented move by the institutions of the Iranian deep state to directly interfere in the voting and secure the presidency. It also explains Khamenei's overt interference: sources say he has barred potential candidates from running, including the grandson of the founder of the revolution, Hassan Khomeini.

It seems that Khamenei and the deep state institutions realize that whichever faction wins the presidency will improve its chances in the competition to succeed the supreme leader. Khamenei and the deep state do not want any one individual, like Hassan Khomeini, to enter the race and make the June elections into a more exciting affair that would be harder for the regime to control. Therefore, they are doing whatever they can to prevent anyone from mobilizing the reformist and moderate bloc and to ensure a conservative candidate replaces Hassan Rouhani.

The upcoming presidential elections are being held under difficult economic conditions, the result of about 3 years of sanctions that have hit the most important sectors of Iran's economy. The economic crisis is likely to have a major impact on Iran's political landscape and determine which slogans the candidates use to win citizens' votes.



According to Iranian sources, the most important question in the upcoming elections is voter turnout. Voter turnout was below 45% in the recent parliamentary elections (February 2020), but high voter turnout could significantly benefit one faction at the expense of the other. The reformist camp depends on a high voter turnout and declares that this would lead to their victory. Conservatives, especially recently, have preferred that voter turnout remain less than 50% to improve their chances of victory.

Over recent decades Iranian elections have shown that both conservatives and reformists enjoy a majority in certain geographic areas. While conservatives enjoy a majority in small cities and the countryside, reformists and moderates enjoy popularity in larger industrial cities inhabited by the middle class, who naturally favor reformists. This has been evident in the Iranian elections over the past two decades and should be taken into consideration in any analysis of the upcoming elections.

Reformist sources affirm that they expect an unfair race due to conservatives' policies. The reformist camp is also concerned that they might lose the elections because of voters' reluctance to embrace their candidates, who are held partially responsible for the failure of Rouhani's government.

The victory of President Joe Biden in the American elections has changed calculations within the reformist camp with regard to whether it is worth taking part in elections. The Trump administration's policies had deepened the reformists' reluctance to run in elections and tipped the balance – until the end of autumn 2020 – in favor of those who are against participation. But the arrival of Biden provided strong momentum to the forces within the reformist camp that support participation in elections.

Conservatives, on the other hand, are looking forward to winning the upcoming presidential elections now that they have taken control of the Iranian parliament. However, this camp needs to overcome divisions within its ranks to achieve this goal. During the preparations for Iran Presidential elections over the last two years there have been calls for a "military man" to become president and lead the way out of the current crisis. This seems to reflect a desire by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to extend its influence to the political domain and add control over the executive branch to its dominance of parliament. This is a crucial period in the conservative camp's efforts to close its ranks. Major domestic political trends in Iran indicate that the country is moving towards more isolation and extremism, and it is likely that the IRGC and associated factions will take either direct or indirect control over all organs of the state.

At the foreign policy level, major political, economic, and social trends in Iran indicate that more severe consequences will follow – i.e. the regime would adopt even more extremist attitudes and get more involved in regional conflicts – if the international community does not find a way to solve this problem and bring Iran back into its orbit. This perspective is based on the growing aspirations of political forces inside Iran, which is set to add new levels of complexity to the situation.

With these concerns in mind, the international community and the GCC countries must devise innovative initiatives to resolve the impasse before it reaches the point of no return. Even if it is still impossible to comprehensively resolve all outstanding issues, a regional initiative could address some of the issues that concern the international community and the Arab region alike, namely Iran's ballistic missile program and its regional expansionist agenda. Such an initiative, however, should take into consideration the strategic determinants that have so far prevented stakeholders from reaching a practical resolution of the issue.

Regional approaches to solving the Iranian impasse have so far considered neither the duplicity of the ruling regime in Tehran nor the nature of relations between the government and the deep state, rendering them hollow and superficial and only based on pacification proposals and goodwill gestures. As for the global approaches to address Iran's question, these have also been superficial and have so far failed to understand the deep ideological, psychological, and historical factors surrounding the Iranian issue.



If the international community is sincere about overcoming all the obstacles preventing the resolution of this issue, it must concede a pivotal role to the GCC countries, those most affected by Iran's missile program and expansionist agenda. The international community should support the launch of a regional dialogue on outstanding issues that is convened under the umbrella of the United Nations and benefits from strong international oversight and support.

Unless the impasse with Iran is resolved, the coming years are likely to see more costly instability and violence as a consequence of the Islamic Republic's expansionist projects. Moreover, failing to capitalize on the favorable opportunities on offer to resolve the impasse could push the crisis past the point of no return.

It is therefore urgent that those most affected by this crisis – the Gulf states – help devise a solution to the stalemate. To this end, a strategic perspective is required; the Iranian regime must be engaged with great care, finesse, and realism. GCC decision-makers must demonstrate strong will and coordinate their efforts with global partners. The ultimate goal of these efforts should be an agreement that represents a step toward Iran becoming a normal member of the international community once more; this would represent the best outcome for the Gulf region, the international community, and sanctions-battered Iran.

SOCIAL ISSUES – THE NEGLECTED TOPIC IN IRANIAN POLITICS AND THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Social issues have grown increasingly explosive in Iran, yet the elite in the Islamic Republic continues to neglect these concerns. It has failed to find either a political or economic response to demands raised by the growing ranks of protesters.

On June 18 Iran will elect a successor to President Hassan Rouhani, who will be stepping down after eight years in office. However, although the socio-economic situation in the country has deteriorated dramatically during Rouhani's presidency, the Iranian elite continues to sideline the question of social justice.

Iran's acute socioeconomic crisis is manifested in a largely poverty-stricken lower class and a dwindling middle class – both potential political powder kegs.


Rouhani's presidency has been punctuated by a series of social protests. Recent years have seen almost daily demonstrations by workers, teachers, pensioners, and other groups. These culminated in nationwide protests in late 2017/early 2018 and in November 2019, brutally repressed by the state in both cases.

Although the "social question" is such a burning topic, none of the presidential candidates – whether from the reformist, centrist, conservative, or principlist camp, or from the ranks of the Revolutionary Guards – have given it the attention it merits. Politicians instead merely pay lip service to these concerns, with only intermittent calls to fight corruption. On the other hand, foreign policy issues, such as renewed negotiations with the United States on the Iranian nuclear program, are placed high on the agenda.

It is worth recalling in this context that social justice numbered among the principal aspirations of the Iranian Revolution that led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic. However, it rapidly became apparent, especially after the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, that revolutionary promises made to the "downtrodden," such as an apartment for every Iranian or free electricity and water, had been merely hollow phrases – Khomeinists appropriating the left-wing discourse that defined the zeitgeist of that era.

Reviewing presidential elections since the Iran-Iraq war reveals that 2021 will not be the first time that the "social question" has been ignored. President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97) advocated economic reconstruction in his campaign slogans and pushed ahead with privatization throughout the economy in the name of "development", but his efforts triggered severe social unrest, which was suppressed in 1992. His successor, Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), focused on civil liberties and democratization (within the Islamic Republic's rigid boundaries). He did not, however, put his slogans into practice and proved unable to implement any significant changes. On the social and economic front, he simply continued his predecessor's policies.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13) was the first president to bring the social question to the fore. After two and a half decades of Iranian "illiberal neoliberalism", the social divide had grown wider, making a mockery of the revolutionary ideals of an Islamic Republic that would provide for the "downtrodden." Ahmadinejad's campaign pledge that income from oil exports would translate into improved food supplies for Iranian households degenerated into a populist maneuver. He pursued a program of social housing and universal health insurance – and is one of the few senior politicians in the Islamic Republic who has not been shown to have lined his own pockets. Having adopted



a number of populist promises and policies, he enjoys widespread popularity to this day, especially among the lower class. The targeted monthly cash payments he introduced when reforming subsidies on food and energy went some way to reducing income inequality in the country, albeit with the downside of high inflation.

The agenda pursued by Rouhani (2013-2021) primarily entailed reaching a nuclear deal with the West so US sanctions could be lifted and Iranians' economic situation would improve. However, these hopes were dashed when the July 2015 nuclear deal failed to improve the country's socio-economic prospects. Instead, [increasing income inequality](#) led to growing social frustration. The situation came to a head three years later when Donald Trump withdrew from the nuclear agreement and reimposed crippling US sanctions. A dramatic devaluation of the Iranian rial ensued, along with horrendous inflation on a scale never before experienced in the Islamic Republic's history, which subsequently led to more widespread impoverishment. Official figures indicate that two years ago [19 million people](#), as many as [one in three city dwellers](#), [were living in slums](#),

This state of affairs sparked the [uprisings in 2017/18 and 2019](#) that challenged the entire regime. Although the Islamic Republic and many local observers have portrayed the protests as a direct consequence of sanctions, their root causes lie in social injustice, poverty, and corruption, not to mention the dearth of opportunities for political participation and the predominance of authoritarian structures – factors that predate the U.S. sanctions. The countrywide protests that erupted in 2017/18 came barely two years after the nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions – in other words, at a time when Iranians should have been beginning to experience the deal's economic impact. However, the general populace did not feel the [benefits](#) of economic recovery, which mainly favored members of the elite with close links to the regime.

One of the most striking aspects of the protests in recent years is that the [lower middle class and the lower class](#), people in small towns and villages right across the country, are spearheading the dissent.

This distinguishes the current struggle from previous unrest, for example in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 elections or the student protests in 1999, where it was mainly the urban middle class making its voice heard. Those demonstrations focused on civil rights, with scant attention paid to social issues. The 2017/18 and 2019 protests, in contrast, were sparked mainly by socioeconomic factors. [The trigger for the November 2019 uprising](#), for example, was a threefold rise in gasoline prices, literally overnight. These protests took a somewhat different form, employing [more radical slogans](#) that challenged not only one camp but the entire system: reformists and hardliners alike, clerics and the Revolutionary Guards. In response, the regime adopted an unprecedented rod-of-iron strategy: during an Internet blackout that lasted more than a week, an estimated 1,500 people were executed, some quite openly on the streets.

Despite this explosive situation, none of the candidates has thoroughly engaged with the social question in the run-up to the presidential election. Even reformist Mostafa Tajzadeh, now banned by the Council of Guardians from standing in the election, has not commented on the social question, even though he has made radical demands in other contexts, calling for example for constitutional amendments.

It comes as no surprise, however, that politicians are turning a blind eye to social issues. Reformists, who view the middle class as their primary electorate, have attempted to lure these voters to the polls over the past 20 years by calling for civil liberties and individual freedoms, while also pledging to reconcile Islam and democracy. The lower class, often categorized as conservative and religious, has traditionally tended to support the principlist or hardliner camp. However, the protests during Rouhani's presidency revealed just how much support the regime had lost among the lower classes, previously seen as its bedrock within society. The potential political consequences of [shifting class dynamics](#) remain difficult to predict. While some within the circles of power repeatedly emphasize that social issues are a ticking timebomb, according to renowned Iranian social historian Touraj Atabaki the Islamic Republic seems to have lost all interest in improving the situation of workers and other groups facing economic precarity. This neglect of social issues is presumably related to the huge influence of Iran's oligarchic elite..

Ahmadinejad, who deliberately addressed the lower classes, at least in his slogans, and presented programs designed to assist them, was an exception to this general rule. Other politicians have repeatedly attempted to emulate Ahmadinejad's recipe for success. In the 2017 presidential elections, for example, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, a military man and then mayor of Tehran who is now the speaker of parliament, ran on a pledge to address social inequality, claiming that 4% of Iranians had seized the country's wealth whereas he represented the remaining 96%. Ebrahim Raisi – chief justice for three years and former custodian and chairman of the religious/commercial Astan-e Qods-e Razavi bonyad (charitable trust) – has also attempted to score points by taking an anti-corruption stance, both in 2017 and at present. Four years ago, he drew attention to Iran's 16 million slum dwellers in order to attack the incumbent Rouhani, who had failed to keep his economic promises.

However, these populist endeavors proved unsuccessful in the last elections in 2017, as Ghalibaf and Raisi lacked credibility and a convincing program. It is therefore no surprise that many polls suggested Ahmadinejad might still be a promising candidate in those presidential elections. Yet the Council of Guardians has repeatedly refused to allow him to stand, also in 2021. It recently became apparent how much the regime fears him when security forces surrounded his home as a precautionary measure after the announcement that the Council of Guardians had prevented him from running.

There is no reason to believe that the social question will become less of a burning issue in the Islamic Republic – quite the contrary. The middle class is constantly shrinking. Poverty and sky-high rents that push tenants out of city centers long ago ceased to be lower-class problems and are increasingly affecting the middle class. A few months ago, it was [reported](#) that many middle-class families could no longer afford meat, and that queues had therefore formed to buy chicken skin. [Some sources indicate](#) that demand for meat and fish has fallen at least 50% over the past year.

In addition, the Islamic Republic suffers from a glaring lack of political freedoms, which also thwarts social justice. Left-wing, socialist or social-democratic parties or movements –although [part of the country's modern political culture](#) alongside nationalism and Islamism –

are not allowed to operate or present candidates in elections. Independent trade unions face massive pressure and key labor leaders are repeatedly arrested.

Social justice nevertheless remains an important issue for the people of Iran. Given the lack of parties or movements that focus on social issues, Iranians are looking for alternatives. However, none of the protagonists that operate within the system prioritize this topic. Reformists, long overrated in Europe as offering new hope, pay it the least attention of all: key representatives of the reform camp made clear statements opposing both nationwide protests in recent years as they unfolded, insulting the protesters as inferior or "[vultures](#)." Reformers and conservatives alike belong to a power elite that explicitly opposes social democratic values and policies: neither seeks true democratization or tackles the vital social issues.

As a result, a [vicious circle](#) has become entrenched: as a result of ignoring social issues, reformist presidents or those lauded as moderate by the West (such as Khatami and Rouhani) repeatedly pave the way for the rise of right-wing populist challengers (Ahmadinejad and today Raisi).

The social question is a true powder keg. Addressing it seriously would entail challenging almost all of the Islamic Republic's power centers. Structural corruption and nepotism, monopolization of political and economic power, and animosity towards the United States (and thus the burden of sanctions) are among the important factors that generate social disparities. Yet it is impossible to fix these problems without making structural changes to the system.

Against this backdrop, the social question will remain unresolved no matter which candidate becomes president in June. (At the moment, many indicators point to Raisi). Further social protests, which often rapidly take on a political twist, are thus inevitable.

Reviving the nuclear deal could certainly help the regime stabilize the economy to some degree and obtain financial resources to subsidize vital goods like flour, meat, electricity, or gasoline, making these products more affordable for more Iranians. The system's inherent social inequalities, though, would still persist. Instead of long overdue structural reforms, a resurgence of populist economic policies looks more likely.



The regime continues to fear another eruption of popular rage. The many protesters who took to the streets in 2019 – as many as 200,000, even according to official figures – have little to lose. The pseudo-choice between reformists and conservatives no longer stems public fury. This makes protesters unpredictable and dangerous for an elite that holds power yet has no response to the demands raised by demonstrators nor anything whatsoever to offer them, either economically or politically.

THE ELECTION IS ALL ABOUT ECONOMICS, BUT LABOR UNIONS REFUSE TO GET INVOLVED

Iran's unions will sit out the electoral contest even though economic issues are key to the upcoming elections. Amid the widespread exclusion of candidates from the race and facing questions of organizational survival, they are hoping for better times to come.

In recent years workers from all walks of life have taken to the streets. On more than one occasion, frustration about falling living standards has erupted into large-scale popular protests. Politicians, too, are acutely aware that economic grievances matter to Iran's electorate. In fact, as Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj points out in his blog post, the 2021 presidential race is all about economics.

One might imagine that workers' organizations and labor unions would benefit strategically from an election focused on economic issues. But this is not the case in Iran this year. Unions will sit out the electoral contest, waiting for better times.


ORGANIZED LABOR IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

Organized labor in Iran rarely makes international headlines. Yet labor unions do exist in the Islamic Republic. These organizations are officially licensed. They mainly organize occupational groups and professions. Certain professions such as nurses, teachers, engineers, journalists, and filmmakers are represented by more powerful and politically significant unions. There is also a union confederation that claims to represent the working class more generally, called the Workers' House. The Workers' House organizes the employees of large enterprises in the industrial and service sector and campaigns among the country's many local pensioners' associations.

Following a period of repression in the wake of the 1979 revolution and the eight-year war with Iraq, labor unions re-emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s as Iran's political arena gradually opened up. Post-war governments agreed to liberalize the management of the country's bloated public sector and give former revolutionaries and war veterans organizational tools to represent their professions in policy-making and collective bargaining.

Not all of Iran's unions are created equally. Some unions have managed to organize a large share of their respective professions. For instance, the filmmakers' unions provide members with generous social insurance, generating a strong incentive for workers to join. Most other labor organizations have not been so lucky. This includes the teachers' unions and the Workers' House, which are the largest unions in Iran today. Because these unions offer fewer benefits to members, they have remained rather small.

Over the past two decades, all unions have been forced to adapt to the country's rapidly changing political economy. Economic liberalization and neoliberal reforms have undermined the political influence of organized labor. When union leaders tried to counter these trends by making their organizations more participatory and open to larger groups of new members, they often encountered state repression and intimidation. Thus the unions, especially the teachers' unions, opted to keep their organizations small while trying to get as many as possible to participate in rallies whenever the political climate permitted it. For teachers, the 2015 nuclear deal created just such an opportunity. As the political arena opened up and became less repressive, teachers' unions staged multiple rounds



of nation-wide demonstrations that were entirely unprecedented in scale, often involving several dozens of towns across the country. Teachers demanded higher pay, lower wage discrimination, and more job stability in Iran's increasingly privatized educational sector.

COOPERATION AND CONFRONTATION WITH THE ROUHANI GOVERNMENT

The relationship between the unions and the Rouhani government has been unstable and unhealthy, to say the least. Although the unions opposed many of Rouhani's policies, they generally supported the political factions behind the Rouhani government. Unions gratefully accepted lower levels of repression and appreciated that the government engaged and consulted them directly. Rouhani also assigned a number of influential posts to individuals close to unions. For instance, Ali Rabi'i, who has long been affiliated with the Workers' House, was minister of labor and social affairs from 2013 to 2018.

The unions cautiously benefitted from the first years of the Rouhani administration. However, after 2017 the situation worsened rapidly. In 2018, the Trump administration re-imposed and tightened sanctions on Iran, leading to a severe economic downturn. Foreign pressure and massive popular protests in 2018 and 2019 also combined to greatly increase unity across Iran's otherwise divided political establishment, leading to a crackdown on dissent and much higher levels of repression. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the unions were directly involved in organizing the popular protests that shook the country in December 2017 and November 2019, some union leaders were called out for opposing state violence and expressing sympathy with the protestors' demands. To make things even worse, the global pandemic hit Iran particularly hard. Crisis-response and lockdown measures excluded unions from policy platforms and made it hard to sustain workers' organizing. Teachers' unions in particular have borne the brunt of repression, with their leaders locked up or threatened with jail time for organizing protests.

While the unions have thus been severely weakened since 2017, ironically they have also become more central to reformist electoral coalitions. This is because the decline of the unions has coincided with a much broader backlash against reformist and moderate factions in Iranian politics. The Guardian Council has disqualified high-ranking reformist candidates from running for electoral office. However, weaker candidates associated with unions were allowed to run, probably because they posed less of a threat. As a result, the reformist coalition in the 2020 parliamentary elections was led by a combination of the Workers' House, a group associated with the teachers' unions, and the party of the deceased former president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Unsurprisingly, the elections ended in a severe blow to the reformists, as the limited outreach of these labor organizations failed to compensate for the absence of more powerful candidates.

WAITING OUT THE ELECTIONS

This year, with the presidential elections now only days away, unions have mostly refrained from campaigning. The unions' low excitement about the race will likely depress voter turnout further. There are two sets of reasons why the unions have declined to get involved.

The first set has to do with the elections themselves. Union leaders tend to follow the mandates of the reformist political establishment, which has so far not appeared eager to endorse any of the contestants. Added to this are the weak linkages between the contestants and unions. None of the contestants pride themselves on their occupational identity or working-class background. And none have served at any of the major ministries or welfare organizations involved in collective bargaining with labor representatives, such as the social security organization, the ministry of labor and social affairs, or the ministry of education. Two of the main reformist candidates are an economist and former head of the central bank, Abdolnaser Hemmati, and a bureaucrat and former provincial governor, Mohsen Mehralizadeh.



The second reason why unions prefer to wait out this election has to do with organizational survival. The last years of the Rouhani presidency have been incredibly tough for labor activists and organizations alike. Union leaders hope that by sitting out the electoral contest they will be able to engage any new government on friendlier and healthier terms. Many union activists also vividly remember the 2005 presidential campaign, when their support for losing candidates led to estrangement from and repression by the new administration.

Iran's main union organization, the Workers' House, is currently not directly represented in either parliament or government for the first time since the 1979 revolution. It lost its last parliamentary seat in 2020, and Ali Rabi'i left the labor ministry in 2018. Fighting to regain some influence, the Workers' House is encouraging its constituency to vote. However, the union's campaign has so far entirely ignored the presidential race. Instead, the Workers' House is focused exclusively on a by-election to get its long-time leader, Alireza Mahjoob, re-elected into parliament. Like the teachers' unions, the Workers' House appears cautiously optimistic that its fortunes, thoroughly battered over the past four years, can only improve moving forward.

WHICH DIRECTION? THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND IRAN'S TRADE STRATEGY

Iran will seek to boost foreign trade in order to attract foreign investment and realize the country's full economic potential no matter who wins the elections. Rather, the issue at stake is whether Iran goes global or focuses on the East.

Iran will soon have a new president and, judging from the conduct of the Guardian Council in rejecting many mainstream and reformist candidates, there is a high likelihood that the next president will be closely affiliated with the faction known as the hardliners. With respect to Iran's foreign trade, the question is whether the emerging change of government will impact the country's overall strategy. In this context, it is necessary to take a closer look at how various parameters impact trading patterns and policies and how the election will influence the relevant processes and dynamics.

THE SHAPING OF TRADE POLICY IN IRAN


Iran has a very complex power structure, with continuous bargaining processes and fluid power relations. The executive branch is an evolving power center, not just because of elections, but also because of processes such as privatization, decentralization, and the changing role of the government, which has moved from being the biggest economic player in the 1980s and 90s to one that is continuously torn between regulatory and economic functions. Complicating this intricacy is a growing culture of various corrupt networks competing for economic interests. In a speech on May 26, supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei pointed to the presence of an "import mafia", which confirms the existence of these corrupt elements in the power structure.

The above attributes have led to a politicization of economic and trade decisions. In addition to the complexity of the country's power structure, Iran's trade strategy has been shaped by three other drivers: revolutionary ideals (such as the desire to reduce dependency on western sources of technology as well as promote trade among Islamic nations), technocratic priorities (including the need to secure modern technologies and investments for key industries such as petroleum, telecom, automotive etc.) and the desire to reduce the country's vulnerability to external sanctions.

The latter driver has underpinned the "resistance economy" strategy, which contrary to the general assumption does not call for Iran to isolate itself from the global economy, but rather promotes domestic capacity building including expanding Iran's export potential. Of note is also the fact that Iranian politicians consider it so important to have a good relationship with the business community. As such, it was not a coincidence that the frontrunner in the presidential race, Ebrahim Raisi, decided to make his first campaign event a meeting with the principals of the Chamber of Commerce.

IS THERE A TRADE STRATEGY?

The amalgamation of the various factors has generated a trade strategy, which was formulated by the government in 2019. The plan comprises targeted import substitution and an expansion of trade with immediate neighbors,



including Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The stated objective in 2019 was to double the value of exports sent to 15 immediate neighbors by March 2022. Another goal was to reduce reliance on Western sources of technology by diversifying import sources. Iran later expressed a desire to enter into long-term strategic partnership agreements with China and Russia in order to generate the needed foreign direct investment.

In the meantime, important cornerstones of the mentioned plan have fallen into place:

- Iran signed a framework agreement with China in March 2021 that will pave the way for greater investment and trade interaction with the Asian superpower;
- Iran and the EEU have signed a preferential trade agreement that has facilitated unprecedented growth in their mutual trade. Incidentally, the most recent data suggest that Russia has replaced Germany as Iran's main European export market.
- Tehran has also expanded trade with immediate neighbors and pursued various infrastructure projects to increase connectivity with neighboring markets. The latter not only promote regional trade, but also position the country as a transit hub for many markets. However, as seen in the case of the Chabahar port, the expansion of infrastructure will require international investments, which China is offering (in the absence of other major investors).

THE LATEST TRADE FIGURES

In the last Iranian year, which ended on March 20, 2021, total foreign trade excluding crude oil exports amounted to \$73 billion, marking a 14% decline compared to the previous Iranian year. In those 12 months, Iran's non-crude exports stood at \$34.5 billion compared to \$38.5 billion of imports. Exports and imports declined by 17% and 12% respectively compared to the previous cycle. This decline can be explained by two parallel phenomena: first, the economic impact of the pandemic, and second, the bottlenecks that external sanctions have created for trade and financial transactions. Though non-crude trade figures point to a trade deficit of \$4 billion, once crude and condensate exports are included the overall trade balance enters positive territory.

Based on the above data, in the mentioned 12 months, the top five export markets for Iranian products were China, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the UAE. The top five sources of imports for Iran were China, the UAE, Turkey, India, and Germany. Evidently, compared to a decade ago when the European Union was the largest trading partner of the country, Iran has moved on to consolidate intensive trade with China as well as grow trade with immediate neighbors.

At the same time, Iranian experts project trade figures to improve in the current Iranian year, both because of a gradual post-Corona normalization of regional and global trade processes as well as an anticipated lifting of sanctions through the revival of the nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A third factor that will enhance trade opportunities in Iran will be the expected release of the country's hard currency funds that have been stranded internationally due to banking sanctions. However, to benefit from these funds, the country will also need to normalize banking relations with the world – a process that will extend beyond the lifting of sanctions.

The end result of all this is that Iran's top trading partner is now China, followed its immediate neighbors, i.e. UAE, Iraq, Turkey and Afghanistan. Another neighbor, Russia, represents the fastest emerging trading partner. It should be noted that the absence of the EU in the top trading partners is a consequence of external sanctions and not of a deliberate strategy on the Iranian side.

THE OUTLOOK: GOING EAST OR GOING GLOBAL?

No matter who has ruled the country, Iran has always had high economic and trade ambitions that require considerable investments. The idea of Iran having an isolated and weak economy does not fit into any of the worldviews of the political establishment. However, as shown above, the overall orientation can be shaped by internal and external factors – and both of these could change in 2021.

Internally, the upcoming change of government could shift the balance of power between various factions and networks. A hardline victory would empower their preferred strategy, which is to deepen economic cooperation with Russia and China and maintain a strategic distance to western powers. Should Abdolnasser Hemmati be the surprise winner, there would potentially be a continuation of the current strategy.

Externally, a potential revival of the JCPOA and the lifting of sanctions would create new opportunities to expand Iran-EU trade. However, there would be three obstacles, namely:

- a potential Raisi presidency, which would put pressure on Iran-EU relations, not only because of the Iranian pivot to the East, but also because of Raisi's poor track record with regards to human rights;
- the hesitation of many European enterprises to engage with the Iranian market in anticipation of potentially new Iran-US tensions;
- a mismatch between the expectations of Iranian businesses and the approach of European companies to the market.

Consequently, even if the JCPOA is restored, chances are that the current strategy will remain in place, with China continuing to be Iran's top trading partner and Iran's immediate neighbors occupying the other top spots.

The key nuance that needs to be appreciated is the fact that a hardline president will potentially attach greater significance to Russia as a strategic partner. Iranian hardliners have left little doubt that they view Russia as Iran's natural "strategic partner". In their analysis, while China is a strong trading partner and source of technology, Russia is the power that will provide Tehran with critical technologies in the fields of weapons, nuclear, and security, as well as cooperate with Iran on regional security issues such as in Syria. Incidentally, the first foreign trip of Iran's hardline Majles speaker, Mohammad Baquer Qalibaf, was to Moscow, where he delivered a message from Ayatollah Khamenei to the Russian side. It was during that visit that Qalibaf quoted Khamenei as emphasizing "strategic relations" with Russia. The hardliners' confidence in Russia is also reflected in the fact that during the first presidential debate, another hardline candidate, Mohsen Rezaei, hinted that he would follow the Russian approach to privatize the Iranian economy. In contrast, a moderate president would prefer to develop balanced relationships with all global powers rather than limit Iran's trade interaction to Eastern and regional players.

THE EU AND IRAN AFTER ROUHANI: TOWARDS A MINIMALISTIC RELATIONSHIP?

For better or worse, Iran remains a pivotal country in the Middle East. The EU will therefore need to judge the next Iranian government on its own merits and devise a realistic strategy focused on European core interests.

When the nuclear agreement between the world powers and Iran, known as the JCPOA, was concluded in 2015, the then-EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini [hoped](#) that it would prove to be a foundation, not a ceiling, for EU-Iran relations. In April 2016 [the joint statement](#) by Mogherini and Iran's foreign minister Javad Zarif set out an ambitious agenda in that direction, ranging from trade to people-to-people and educational exchanges.

But the maximum pressure applied against Iran by the Trump administration and the EU's unwillingness or inability to assert its strategic autonomy in the face of it shelved those plans. With the Democrats back in the White House and prospects for a restoration of the JCPOA improving, this could be an opportunity to revive that agenda.

Now, however, EU-Iran relations are about to hit another wall, this time on the Iranian side. After the Guardians Council [purged](#) almost all of the moderate and reformist candidates for the upcoming presidential elections in June 2021, the EU is bracing for the prospect of a conservative becoming the president of Iran. The frontrunner is the current chief of the judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi.

Representatives of the conservative camp in Iran are traditionally more skeptical of engagement with the "West", particularly the people-to-people and cultural aspects of it, which they see as a means for the West to infiltrate and erode the Islamic Republic. The rise of someone like Raisi – who carries the heavy burden of past involvement in mass human rights violations, such as the massacre of political prisoners in 1988 – would mean that the EU would pay reputational and transactional costs for dealing with the presumptive next administration. The stage is being set for a rather minimalistic phase in EU-Iran relations.

The EU has partly itself to blame for arriving at this situation. To be clear, the main responsibility lies with the undemocratic nature of the Iranian system. The Rouhani administration's efforts at social and economic reform were consistently [thwarted](#) by the Islamic Republic's "deep state". The Guardians Council elevated that sabotage to the next level by eliminating any plausible reformist challenge in the presidential elections.

The next culprit is the Trump administration which, by violating the JCPOA and instituting its maximum pressure campaign, severely weakened Iranian advocates of a rapprochement with the West and reform at home. Then there are the mistakes and mismanagement of the Rouhani administration itself, which was often seen as aloof and ineffective, particularly by Iranians of modest means. It was also tainted by the severe repression of economic protests in Iran in 2017-2019.

Yet the European side must bear some responsibility. The EU/E3 (Britain, France, Germany) discredited the notion of Europe as a viable Western option for Iran by failing to effectively stand up to Trump's policies. The special purpose vehicle "INSTEX", designed to circumvent the extraterritorial U.S. sanctions, [never really got off the ground](#). The EU thus proved unable to deliver to Iran the economic benefits Tehran had supposedly secured as a result of the JCPOA. Worse, the E3 occasionally [seemed to blame Iran](#) (more than the US) for the downfall of the JCPOA.

Equally unfortunate were one-sided [accusations](#) that Iran was playing a destabilizing regional role – Britain and France enjoy close ties with other problematic actors in the region, like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE), and their [arms sales](#) to these monarchies are burgeoning. All of this has further reduced Iranian moderates' room for maneuver.

Iran, however, will remain a pivotal country in the Middle East. Its policies will continue to shape a range of conflicts in the region, with security implications for the EU, for example in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. They will also affect stability in the Persian Gulf and nuclear proliferation. The EU will have to deal with Iran irrespective of who is in charge of the country. Hence, it will have to judge the incoming administration in Tehran on its own merits and devise a realistic strategy that focuses on EU's core interests.


First among those interests is a revival of the JCPOA, which should achieve the non-proliferation objectives in exchange for sanctions relief for Iran. There is a reasonable chance that the ongoing negotiations in Vienna will reach a mutually satisfactory outcome. As far as Iran is concerned, the decision to restore the JCPOA is taken by the "system" (nezam) and endorsed by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Thus, at the strategic level, it is linked neither to the Rouhani government nor to the upcoming election. Notwithstanding potentially different tactical approaches, the [main interest](#) shared across the establishment is to get the sanctions lifted: not only because they hamper the Iranian economy per se but also because they stand in the way of the regional business interests of key stakeholders, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guardians Corps (IRGC). Also, for all the talk in Tehran about "strategic partnerships" with Russia and China, both Moscow and Beijing also insist on compliance with the JCPOA.

The nezam would not mind seeing the diplomatically and technically competent Zarif team finalize the negotiations so that the incoming conservative government could reap the benefits of a deal and claim credit for the improvement of Iran's economic situation – at the expense of their centrist-reformist opponents. The EU should continue playing its facilitating role in restoring the JCPOA, even if doing so could help strengthen the forces in Tehran that are less amenable to broader engagement than is the outgoing Rouhani administration.

Second is the promotion of regional de-escalation in the Persian Gulf and Middle East. With Washington taking a step back from its unconditional embrace of Riyadh, and Iran-supported Houthi rebels enjoying battlefield successes against the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, discreet [Saudi-Iranian talks](#) have already taken place in Baghdad. With the advent of a Raisi administration, more talks between Iran and its regional rivals Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) are likely to follow. The fact that a Raisi foreign policy team would presumably be more aligned with the preferences of the deeper security establishment, including the IRGC, should facilitate such talks. A Raisi victory would eliminate whatever daylight existed between the diplomacy and the "military field" that Zarif [alluded](#) to in his leaked interview. The fact that the talks with the Saudis are led not by the foreign minister but by Ismail Ghaani, the chief of the Quds Force of the IRGC, suggests that any eventual deal that also takes the legitimate security interests of Saudi Arabia into account has a better chance of being implemented by the Iranian side.

During the Rouhani years, Saudi and Emirati diplomats often dismissed the president and Zarif as merely a smiling façade of a regime where the "real decisions" were taken by the hardliners in the security apparatus and the supreme leader's office. Such an excuse for rejecting dialogue, never entirely credible, will carry even less weight with a Raisi administration in place. The EU should vigorously support regional de-escalation efforts.

However, the EU should be clear-eyed that the Iranian missiles and proxies in the region are not up for discussion as long as Tehran sees them as indispensable deterrents. There will be continuity with the outgoing government on this. That said, the conservatives might be better placed to come to some understandings in the region, such as limiting the range of the missiles, in exchange for reciprocal steps from, chiefly, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The overall lowering of tensions would enhance security in the Strait of Hormuz, a global shipping route where some EU natio-



ns nations, led by France, have [deployed](#) a maritime surveillance mission. De-escalation might also have positive ripple effects in other scenarios relevant for the EU security, such as Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

The third core interest of the EU is the promotion of human rights in Iran. This has normative and practical implications: there are still a number of dual European-Iranian nationals languishing in Iranian prisons on trumped-up charges.

Given the background of Ebrahim Raisi, human rights might seem the most challenging area for engagement. However, paradoxically, the fact that he hails from the conservative camp might enable him to take steps unavailable to more moderately inclined politicians. Much of the mischief in the latest years, such as [imprisoning of dual nationals](#), was carried out by conservatives in the judiciary and security apparatus who aimed to embarrass their moderate opponents and sabotage their outreach to the West. With the presidency in conservative hands, such an incentive for wreaking havoc would be removed. It would also enable direct negotiations with those decision-makers in Tehran who have largely been out of reach during the Rouhani's tenure in office, very much to the frustration of European diplomats.

It is also worth keeping in mind that, whatever Raisi's reprehensible past, the political environment in Iran has changed from the revolutionary zeal of the 1980s. He himself found it necessary to at least [appear to oppose](#) the Guardians Council's decision to clear the way for his victory by excluding plausible reformist candidates. Besides, the history of Iranian civic activism by no means suggests that his election will be meekly accepted as the end of the struggle for the expansion of civil rights and political participation.

Indeed, Raisi sees the presidency as a stepping stone for his ultimate rise to succeed Khamenei, so he might have an incentive to boost his legitimacy by appealing to a broader segment of the society than just his core supporters. Although extreme skepticism should be the default position of the EU, it should not preclude attempts to engage. Intensifying talks on the release of dual nationals imprisoned in Iran would be a good place to start.

The prospect that the conservatives could capture the one major institution of the state – the presidency – that was hitherto not in their hands is a discouraging one for the EU. However, Brussels and other European capitals should keep open the channels of communication with Tehran, right-size their expectations, and focus on their core interests. In the long run, this could provide the basis for broader re-engagement once the political conditions in Iran swing back to more openness. While preparing for the future, however, it is also useful to bear in mind that the Iranian elections have a long record of producing surprises. Raisi's victory, although probable, is not a done deal yet.

THE PRE-ENGINEERED ELECTION

The nuclear deal will likely survive under Ebrahim Raisi, but further engagement with the West will be complicated.

The ultra-conservative head of the Iranian judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, has just won one of the country's most controversial elections. Less than 50% of the electorate voted in the election, which is the lowest rate of participation in the history of the Islamic Republic.

Presidential elections, held every four years in Iran, are the country's most important political event, especially every eight years, when a new administration usually takes office. Past elections have drawn up to 85% of eligible voters to the polls.

The mass disqualification of candidates – combined with deep voter apathy, frustration and anger, and Covid-19 restrictions on both campaign events and polling stations – led to an election result that was already predicted.


While Iranian elections are not fully free or fair, they have been fairly competitive in the past, at least among those candidates that have been allowed to run. And in the past two-and-a-half decades since the 1997 election of Mohammad Khatami, high voter participation has meant more votes for the reformists and moderates, handing landslide victories to their candidates. This includes the previous presidential election in 2017, when Ebrahim Raisi, who was also the hardline favorite back then, lost to Hassan Rouhani in a [landslide](#).

However, this election was widely seen by most reformists as already “pre-engineered”. In order to ensure a guaranteed win for Ebrahim Raisi and avoid a second embarrassing defeat, the Guardian Council disqualified all prominent reformist and moderate rivals and only allowed two relatively obscure moderates to run. This unprecedented mass disqualification ruled out a former president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a former speaker of parliament, Ali Larijani, and a current vice president, Eshagh Jahangiri, all of whom had a strong support base and could have been potential challengers to Raisi. Therefore the Guardian Council prevented any serious competition in the election and cleared a guaranteed path to victory for the hardline favorite.

Azar Mansoori, the deputy head of Iran's largest reformist party, the People's Unity, told me that the Guardian Council eliminated the minimum requirements for fair competition. “It is very clear. This time they didn't even allow Larijani in. And the two remaining moderates had no power to resist the hidden government [the deep state] and other parallel entities. They wouldn't be qualified to run if there was any doubt that they could resist.”

One fairly unknown moderate, Abdolnasser Hemmati, the former head of Iran's central bank, was allowed to run. He was a technocrat in the Rouhani administration with very little charisma, who lacked the political support needed to win such a controversial election. Major reformist parties refused to support any of the approved candidates, announcing that, after the mass disqualification by the Guardian Council, they had no candidates to support.

Ebrahim Raisi received slightly more votes this time than in 2017, but this time with no rival on the other side. It was clear that the hardliners were not really aiming for a competitive election with high voter participation, but rather a guaranteed result with the help of their core base of supporters.



Ms. Mansoori told me that Raisi has basically won the election by coming in second place. “In the previous election in 2017, Mr Raisi received about 16 million votes, which was around 28% of all eligible voters, and Rouhani won with 24 million votes, more than 50% of eligible voters. In this election in 2021, the winning candidate received the votes of 29% of eligible voters,” Ms. Mansoori explained.

Ebrahim Raisi is believed to have high ambitions beyond the presidency. He is widely seen as one of the potential successors to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the favorite candidate of the IRGC and its intelligence and security forces. Ayatollah Khamenei was president himself before being named supreme leader. It seems that Ebrahim Raisi and the powerful forces that support him have been trying to follow the same path, from the presidency to supreme leadership.

Many Iranian analysts and political figures believe that Donald Trump’s maximum-pressure policy – which included pulling out of the nuclear deal, imposing crippling economic sanctions, escalating military tensions, and playing a part in the assassination of Iran’s top general and top nuclear scientist – all helped push Iran to the right. Iranian moderates and pro-diplomacy voices were weakened under Trump, the country’s more hardline factions and militaristic forces were emboldened and strengthened, and the political space became increasingly securitized.

As this presidential election unfolded, Iranian and American diplomats were making progress in Vienna, negotiating a return to the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) that President Trump left in 2018. Though Raisi hails from the anti-JCPOA camp in Iran, he has recently voiced his support for the negotiations. And once a final agreement on the nuclear deal is reached, we can expect continuity on Iran’s commitment even after Raisi comes into office in August, despite his hardline past. This is because the agreement already exists on paper and has the approval of the supreme leader.

Moreover, there are still a few weeks left of Hassan Rouhani’s presidency; Raisi’s inauguration is not until early August. If the current team of negotiators under Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif get the nuclear negotiations over the finish line before the change of administration, the deal will have a good chance to survive.

But any future negotiations on issues beyond the JCPOA – whether on Iran’s nuclear program, its missiles, or regional policy – will be more complicated under a hardline president. Raisi has been [sanctioned](#) by the United States for his alleged [role](#) in the mass executions of thousands of political prisoners in 1988, as a member of a “death committee”. His hardline views and his past record of human rights abuses will complicate his administration’s engagement with the West.

Masoud Bastani, an Iranian journalist based in Tehran, says that Raisi will pursue a hardline policy towards the West. “As a first step Raisi posted Ali Bagheir Kani as his representative at the Foreign Ministry, a figure known as Saeed Jalili’s deputy during Iran’s failed negotiations with the West. And during his press conference, while Raisi tried to signal a green light to the Saudis, he said decisively that he is not willing to meet with the American president,” Mr Bastani told me.

Ebrahim Raisi’s future presidency will most likely resemble the era of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, when nuclear negotiations took place but went nowhere, and relations with the West became more turbulent. This will complicate the follow-on negotiations that President Joe Biden has mentioned in the past, in the context of his desire to follow a return to the JCPOA with more diplomacy and newer agreements with Iran.

Iran’s relations with the West are very much centered around tensions with the United States. Tehran and Washington have been caught in a cycle of mismatched timing over the past three decades. When pro-engagement presidents emerged in Iran and tried to reach out to the United States, they quickly ran into opposition from hawkish leaders in Washington. Vice versa, when pro-diplomacy American leaders tried to reach out to the other side, anti-diplomacy forces gained power in Tehran. For example, when reformist president Mohammad Khatami prese



nted a pro-diplomacy discourse to the West, it soon coincided with George Bush's famous "Axis of Evil" speech. And when Barack Obama talked about negotiating with Iran, he coincided with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's anti-American administration.

With Joe Biden rising to the White House and ending Donald Trump's one-term presidency, there was a brief opportunity to break this cycle. Joe Biden and Hassan Rouhani had a few months, between January and June, to make a fast return to the JCPOA that could have boosted the Iranian economy and potentially changed the daily lives of many Iranians. With that backdrop and the active participation of voters, another moderate could potentially have risen to the presidency in Iran. In that case, two pro-engagement presidents in Tehran and Washington would have coincided for four and possibly eight years. They could have made progress on issues beyond the nuclear program and eased the four-decade-long tensions between the two countries.

But now that hardliner Ebrahim Raisi has become president just months after Joe Biden, this long cycle of bad timing between Iran and the United States will likely continue.

A FRONTRUNNER WITH A DARK PAST

All the potential obstacles to Ebrahim Raisi's bid for the presidency appear to have been overcome. Although he has no track record in government, he does have ample experience with suppressing political opposition.

Clothes make the man, even in the Islamic Republic. Viewed from that angle, Ebrahim Raisi, the most promising candidate vying for the Iranian presidency, has altered his style several times. With a political message in each case, of course.

The garment worn under the robe that denotes him as a Shiite cleric is crucially important in this context. The classic version, known as a qaba, is loose cut and skims the body. It is favored by more traditional religious figures, such as former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini or his successor Ali Khamenei. The competing style, labbade, is tighter fitting and made of thicker fabric, with a high-necked collar. Mohammad Khatami, the Reformist former president, is associated with this style, generally preferred by more modern representatives of the clerical class.

Raisi initially forged his career sporting the more traditional variant. Photos from the 1980s show him in a qaba. During the 2017 election campaign, when he first ran for president, Raisi suddenly appeared in a labbade. He may have speculated that this would attract more votes in the election, although ultimately it did not pay off. Having been appointed as chief justice in 2019, he once again began wearing the qaba.

It would not be the last switch. During the current campaign for the upcoming presidential elections, Raisi has repeatedly alternated between the qaba and labbade for his public appearances.

ELECTION CAMPAIGNING WITHOUT OPPONENTS

All the potential obstacles to Ebrahim Raisi's bid for the presidency appear to have been overcome. All the candidates that might have posed even the slightest challenge to him were not permitted to run in the election. The Guardian Council, which is close to Khamenei, was responsible for this extensive debarring of presidential aspirants. It appears that not only Khamenei but also all the most powerful state institutions are rooting for Raisi.

The security authorities are also backing Raisi, literally with all their might: on May 19th, just four days after his candidacy was announced, the Attorney General's office, along with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard's intelligence service, apparently issued a [warning](#) instructing several media professionals not to criticize Raisi publicly. In addition, a dozen journalists were summoned and ordered to delete tweets critical of Raisi.

Even those conservative candidates that have been authorized to stand do not constitute a serious challenge to Raisi. Since he is considered the favorite of the country's supreme leader, it is fair to assume that most voters in the hardliner camp prefer him to the other candidates.

BLOOD-STAINED PAST

Now that he is again in the national spotlight, Raisi's past is catching up with him. Until 2016, when he was appointed as chairman of the Astan-e Qods-e Razavi bonyad (charitable trust), one of the most important religious-commercial forces in the Iranian economy, Raisi was known primarily for his leading role in the [mass executions of thousands of political prisoners in 1988](#). During the 2017 campaign, [Rouhani said](#) "The people do not accept those who know only executions and arrests." Though he did not explicitly name Raisi, it was clear he was referring to his principal challenger.

Although he lost the election in 2017, Raisi nonetheless achieved a respectable outcome with 38 percent of the vote. More than 15.8 million Iranians cast their ballots for him – the highest level of votes ever recorded by a candidate who lost the presidential election. Raisi enjoyed the support of the country's largest conservative parties, which are now backing him once again.

FIGHTING CORRUPTION AS A CAMPAIGN SLOGAN

In the current election campaign, Raisi is adopting a much more proactive stance than four years ago. This involves head-on attacks and criticisms of Rouhani and his government. Raisi has pledged to correct the current incumbent's mistakes.

Significantly, the current chief justice is using the fight against corruption to win votes. He underlines that legal measures can be deployed against corruption, as he has done in recent years. However, he also notes that the executive branch could, on the other hand, prevent corruption at the source. Raisi emphasizes that his fight against corruption is boundless and there are red lines that no one can cross. This suggests that he also intends to take action against members of the political elite – a blatant threat to Rouhani and other political competitors.

Fostering transparency is Raisi's second major campaign topic, with a particular focus on the economy. He seeks to reveal the circumstances that the Iranian population face, as he did vis-à-vis the judiciary and Astan-e-Qods-e Razavi, [to cite one of Raisi's preferred campaign slogans](#).

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, Raisi has been traveling around the country for weeks, meeting regularly with entrepreneurs and promoting his program of "support for production". Raisi never misses an opportunity to lambast the Rouhani government for doing too little for the economy and for Iranian manufacturing. Raisi highlights poverty and unemployment as the key problems facing Iranians, making grandiose promises to create four million jobs during his four-year term in office. "I have come to eliminate absolute poverty," [Raisi has stated](#).

RESOUNDING SILENCE ON FREEDOM AND CULTURE

Raisi rarely addresses issues such as democracy or freedom of the press, which presumably would have been on the reformists' campaign slate had they been allowed to run. In this respect, Raisi merely notes that his government will be open to criticism – in contrast, he maintains, to Rouhani's government. To back up his claims he cites the many charges of Rouhani's government against their critics.

However, such pledges are hardly credible given his background as attorney general, deputy chief justice, and now chief justice. Raisi's tenure as chief justice (2019-2021) has on the contrary been accompanied by significantly heightened state repression. This includes greater use of solitary confinement, rising numbers of confessions extracted under torture, and refusal of access to medical treatment for political prisoners. In addition, in July 2020, for the first time in two decades, [a man was executed for consuming alcohol](#). Furthermore, Iran [ranks second globally in terms of the absolute number of executions reported](#), just behind China, and it carried out more than half of all executions in the Middle East and North Africa in 2020. The unprecedentedly brutal repression of the mass nationwide protests in November 2019 also took place on Raisi's watch as chief justice. In addition to the hundreds – if not thousands – of deaths, thousands of protesters remain in custody.

It is not only when dealing with dissidents that Raisi leaves a trail of blood in his wake. The positions that he adopts on other issues are similarly reactionary, even

by the standards of the Islamic Republic. Raisi, for example, is more than a strict advocate of gender segregation in the public realm. In the 2017 election campaign, he also called for further Islamization of academia and universities and urged Iran to resist Western culture. In 2016, when a judge in Yazd, a city in central Iran, ruled that a man found guilty of theft should have his hand amputated, Raisi vigorously supported the sentence. “We are proud to be able to introduce Sharia law,” he proclaimed at the time.

In his election campaign, however, Raisi rarely addresses these issues. Instead, he focuses on the population’s economic plight.

While Raisi plays down these potentially controversial aspects of his agenda, the background of his entourage speaks volumes. The head of cultural policy in his campaign team, for example, is a film producer who previously produced a [TV series](#) for the Revolutionary Guards that denigrated Rouhani’s government as naïve and bitterly criticized the nuclear deal.

Although Raisi has not yet expressed a clear stance on the nuclear agreement, the company he keeps gives an indication of his views. Raisi does emphasize that he wants to pursue a foreign policy that seeks good relations with every country that “is not hostile to us.” However, he is supported by hardline political parties and organizations that are extremely skeptical of the West and that consider hostility toward the United States in particular an essential part of the Islamic Republic’s identity and ideology.

AHMADINEJAD’S SHADOW

In addition, Raisi’s circles include [numerous members of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s government](#). The controversial former president, who held office from 2005 to 2013, made headlines with his aggressive foreign policy toward the West and Israel, as well as with his mismanagement of domestic affairs. Even though many of these figures have since distanced themselves from Ahmadinejad, they remind numerous Iranians of his presidency. The younger generation in particular considers the Ahmadinejad era the diametric opposite of what they want for Iran. There are few things that Iran’s middle class detests more than Ahmadinejad’s anti-

western attitudes and chaotic policies, his deliberately unfashionable appearance, his hypocrisy, and the way in which he flaunted his superstitions. All in all, these factors make it extremely unlikely that Iran’s middle class – [apparently disappointed](#) by President Rouhani, moderates, and reformists alike – will view Raisi and his policies as their salvation. Raisi’s votes are therefore likely to come primarily from loyal supporters of the regime. As a general rule, these voters support the candidate that is assumed to enjoy the support of the Supreme Leader, even though the latter is officially neutral. As in 2017, it seems probable that Raisi will be able to perform especially well in religiously conservative provinces like Qom and Khorasan.

THE END OF THE POWER DUO

If Raisi does win the upcoming elections, which seems likely at this point, the technocrats and pragmatists who have led the country for the past eight years are likely to withdraw from politics.

At present, Raisi and his circle appear to have no ideas at all on how to free the country from the blight of the pandemic and from economic hardship. Although the 61-year-old makes grand promises in his campaign program, he does not explain how he intends to realize them. That means (at least) four years of chaos in domestic and economic policy can be expected, coupled with an (even) more aggressive foreign policy.

The balance of power within the Islamic Republic would also change. A Raisi presidency is likely to take the wind out of the sails of moderates and reformists for the time being. The conservatives, on the other hand, who already have a large majority in parliament, would end up controlling all key positions of power. That would put an end to the previous “power duo” of the government and non-elected centers of power.

However, this kind of sea change would also mean that the conservative hardliners would bear full responsibility for the situation in the country. There would be no longer be a “too moderate” government to scapegoat for the country’s ills. The last time that scenario played out in Iran, the country was rocked by mass protests that shook the entire system; they were directed [against allegations of electoral fraud during the presidential elections in 2009](#).



Tellingly, Raisi has no track record in government, not even at the provincial level. Instead, the hallmark of his political interventions has been repression of any form of political dissent.

Today, in an era of frequent mass protests, when the Islamic Republic has reached a temporary nadir in terms of popularity and legitimacy, it seems Khamenei and the hardliners want to maneuver someone with no scruples about crushing protests into the presidency.

Meanwhile, one question remains. Will the majority of those Iranians who actually go to the polls on June 18th be persuaded by Raisi's fashion experiments, his flipping between the modern labbade and old-school qaba, and vote for him as president? That would be enormously significant in the light of the ambitious goal pursued by Raisi and his supporters: for him to become the supreme leader's successor – in a qaba, of course.

FORGING AHEAD: THE US TRIES TO KEEP NUCLEAR DEAL RETURN TALKS ON TRACK AS IRAN HEADS INTO ELECTION SEASON

Iran is heading to the polls and – not for the first time – an election could get in the way of US-Iran diplomacy. The Biden administration is seeking to avoid becoming embroiled in domestic Iranian politics, but the election is already leaving its mark on the negotiations in Vienna.

Elections in the United States and Iran have been critical moments with regard to reaching and maintaining the Iran nuclear deal. And almost uniquely in both countries, the Iran nuclear deal and the issue of US-Iran diplomacy more broadly have become potent domestic political issues – and the subject of sometimes-vicious, partisan domestic infighting.

Partly humbled by how US domestic politics and the last four years of the Trump administration have damaged the Iran nuclear deal, the Biden administration and its Iran deal negotiating team seem mostly resigned to the potential tragedy of the situation: namely, that while they have just got back into office, the team under the Hassan Rouhani administration, with whom they were able to successfully negotiate the landmark 2015 Iran nuclear deal, could soon undergo major turnover; and that they could soon lose as their negotiating counterparts the Iranian diplomatic professionals with whom they were able to successfully reach an agreement, something they recognize cannot be taken for granted.

Notwithstanding any of their own preferences, the US team is leaving Iran to sort out its domestic politics on its own. However, the US team is well aware that the election outcome could impact not only the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)-return talks currently underway in Vienna but also the composition of the Iranian negotiating team in the hoped-for follow-on nuclear deal talks with the new Iranian administration.


After all, it was not until after Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's election in 2013 – five years after Barack Obama was first elected president and one year into his second term – that rapid progress was made on reaching the interim Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA), in November 2013; and ultimately the "final" Iran nuclear deal, the JCPOA, in July 2015.

Donald Trump's election in November 2016, the withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, and the imposition of the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran put severe strain on the deal. In May 2019, one year after Trump quit the deal, Iran started to progressively reduce implementation of its nuclear commitments under the deal in order to protest the lack of sanctions relief under Trump's maximum pressure campaign, in particular its retraction of oil waivers that had allowed some countries to continue importing Iranian oil until the spring of 2019.

A SHORT WINDOW FOR RETURN, AND A SLOW START

Across the world, proponents of the JCPOA hoped Biden's election in 2020 would enable a rapid US return to the deal and an Iranian return to full implementation before Rouhani's second term comes to an end following the election of a new Iranian president on June 18 and his inauguration in August.

But these hopes were not realized. The Biden administration appeared to be hesitant and cautious as it slowly put



together its foreign policy team in late January and February. And [the time it spent coordinating](#) its Iran policy with European allies and consulting regional partners and key members of Congress, including those whose support it needed to confirm nominees, resulted in a further delay. It did not announce that it was pursuing a “return for return” path with Iran on the nuclear deal until late February.

The Iranians, perhaps disappointed at the Biden administration’s perceived hesitation, [then rejected](#) face to face talks with the US on a “compliance for compliance” deal, even in the context of the Joint Commission that oversees implementation of the Iran nuclear deal, which the US was no longer a member of after Trump’s withdrawal.

Overall, domestic politics on both sides have inhibited quick progress. “The problem is both the Iranian side and the U.S. side are finding it very tough to navigate the domestic political restraints,” Ellie Geranmayeh, deputy director of the Middle East program at the European Council on Foreign Relations, [said in March](#).

“The restraints on the Iranian side were created by slow movement on the US side on this file,” Geranmayeh continued. “And the slow movement on the US side by unnecessary hesitation about how re-entry to JCPOA would go down domestically.”

So it wasn’t until April that indirect US-Iranian talks got underway, on the sidelines of the Joint Commission members meeting in Vienna. The aim was to try to draft a roadmap for how a “return for return” deal would work: what sanctions the US would lift, what steps the Iranians would take to roll back its nuclear program and return to full compliance, and how it would all be sequenced.

The fourth round of those indirect talks, described by US and European negotiators as the most productive yet, concluded in Vienna on May 19. A fifth round got underway in Vienna on Tuesday May 25 – less than a month before Iranian presidential elections, with the campaign moving into high gear.

Some Iran experts who closely consult with US negotiators have [expressed the view](#) that Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei may not yet have given the Iranian negotiators at the Vienna talks the maneuvering room they need to rapidly conclude the deal because he is wary that doing so could boost voter turnout in favor of more moderate candidates or lead to an unpredictable surprise.


“If Iran makes the political decision that it genuinely wants to return to the JCPOA as the JCPOA was negotiated, then it could be done relatively quickly and implementation could be relatively swift,” a senior State Department official, speaking not for attribution, told journalists on a call May 6. “But we don’t know if... Iran has made that decision.”

“This is ultimately a matter of a political decision that needs to be made in Iran,” the official added.

US President Joe Biden, when asked on May 7 if Iran was serious about the nuclear talks in Vienna, said that they were, but that their evident seriousness did not yet mean they were prepared to agree to what was necessary for a mutual return to the JCPOA.

“Yes, but how serious and what they’re prepared to do is a different story,” Biden said. “But we’re still talking.”

Some Iranian reformist-leaning thinkers have expressed the view that many people in their camp who previously turned out for Rouhani may stay home this year, in part because they are so frustrated and disappointed by the economic hardships they have endured and the lack of reforms that he achieved, as well as a growing sense of hopelessness.



All of this is to say that Iranian pre-election politics seems to already be affecting the Vienna negotiations, particularly how long they may drag on if a successful outcome is even possible.

Although it recognizes that Iranian elections politics may affect the talks, the Biden administration's approach is to try to stay on course with the Vienna negotiations; it wants to see if both sides can continue making progress and reach a political understanding on a roadmap to a mutual way back into the deal, whenever that may be.

While the potential impact of the Iranian elections is unclear, "our approach is to forge ahead and try to reach a deal," a senior US negotiator, speaking not for attribution, told me on May 21. "We will leave it to Iran to decide how their politics will play," he said.

"Elections have a way of getting in the way of diplomacy," he added.

FORGING AHEAD, STAYING ON COURSE

Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated in a May 23 interview that the Biden administration is sticking with its Plan A: to try to restore the JCPOA as a first step to see if they can then pursue a longer, broader nuclear deal with Iran, presumably under its next administration, whoever leads it.

"We are fully prepared to go back to the original deal as it was," [Blinken told CNN's Fareed Zakaria on May 23](#). "That's our initial objective. ... If we succeed in that, then we can use that as a foundation both to look at how we can make the deal itself potentially longer and stronger, and also engage on these other issues, whether it's Iran's support for terrorism, its proliferation, its destabilizing support for different proxies throughout the Middle East."

Of the four rounds of Vienna talks to date, Blinken said there has been progress in clarifying what each side would need to do to come back into compliance. But, he added: "The outstanding question, the question that we don't have an answer to yet, is whether Iran, at the end of the day, is willing to do what is necessary to come back into compliance with the agreement," he said. "It's getting... clearer and clearer what needs to happen. The question is: Is Iran prepared to do it?"

Reaching a return deal with the Iranians should be possible, but it is not inevitable, [the senior US negotiator said](#) on May 21.

"While there is a genuine opportunity for a mutual return to compliance, there is no guarantee of success," he said. "And while there is no reason it should take long, it could well drag on."

NO ILLUSIONS – RELATIONS WITH IRAN REMAIN DIFFICULT

Regardless of who becomes its next president, Iran needs to shift its stance. Europe has a crucial role to play in the negotiations – and not just those on the nuclear agreement.

Iran will once again take center stage in our foreign policy when a new president is elected on June 18th. As Hassan Rouhani is not permitted to stand again, having already served two terms in office, a change is on the cards, at least in terms of the figure steering Iran's executive branch.

Although the president has only limited scope to determine the fundamental thrust of Iran's foreign and security policy, he does exert considerable influence on the course pursued in relations with the West. This was demonstrated, for example, by the gap between the policy approaches adopted by the moderate conservative Rouhani and his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as well as by the different ways the West perceived these strategies.

Currently, however, we are not only looking to Tehran, Mashhad, or Isfahan and wondering which box Iranians will check on their ballot papers. We are also observing with great curiosity developments that are unfolding far from Iran, in Vienna, where diplomats are thrashing out the future of the nuclear agreement.

The nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was a success story of European diplomacy. It was signed in 2015 by Iran and the E3/EU+3. i.e., by three European states – France, Great Britain, Germany – plus the European Union, as well as by China, Russia, and the United States. One cornerstone was laid in 2003, under Germany's SPD-Green coalition government, when the German foreign minister invested a great deal of political capital in a trip to Tehran, where, along with his British and French counterparts, he sought to resolve by political means the dangerous conflict over Iran's nuclear program. These efforts would ultimately bear fruit only after a twelve-year diplomatic marathon that led to the conclusion of the JCPOA in Vienna.

The JCPOA is not perfect. It contains certain restrictions that are to be phased out after a few years. It does not cover Iran's ballistic missile program, nor does it prevent the country from pursuing an aggressive foreign policy. That, of course, was apparent to those involved in 2015. However, it remains clear, from today's perspective too, that signing up for this deal was the right thing to do. That is because the agreement achieved the most important goal: it prevented Iran from developing nuclear weapons, a step that would have triggered a nuclear arms race in the Middle East – with potentially catastrophic consequences that no one is keen to imagine.

In addition, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna established a rigorous monitoring regime for independent oversight of Iran's adherence to its commitments. In its regular reports, the IAEA certified that Iran was complying with the provisions stipulated in the deal. In return, Tehran was assured of sanctions relief, which was expected to benefit Iran's economy and population. When I traveled to the country in my role as Baden-Württemberg's minister of economic affairs and finance shortly after the JCPOA was signed, everything pointed to a new beginning and greater openness. All of the talks I had were tinged with a sense of hope for an improved economic situation and rapprochement with the West.

There was, therefore, great disappointment and incomprehension – both in Iran and among the other signatory states – when President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA. By changing US policy to one



of “maximum pressure”, Trump attempted to single-handedly bulldoze the Iranian regime into submission and to that end persistently escalated US sanctions policy.

The E3 attempted to allow legal trade between Europe and Iran to continue, devising creative and audacious solutions such as the INSTEX special purpose vehicle that was established in 2019. Unfortunately, these efforts were merely a symbolic success. That is because pressure from extraterritorial US sanctions also caused European trade with Iran to plummet. Inflation in Iran has skyrocketed, the economy is now in ruins, and unemployment is high, especially among young people – and this difficult situation was exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic that has been ravaging the country for over a year now.

Trump’s Iran policy served as a wake-up call for us in Europe, expediting a process of emancipation leading to greater European sovereignty. One lesson learnt in the process is that we need to add powerful tools to our arsenal as a defense against coercive geo-economic measures. Current debates on establishing a European Export Bank, making use of the updated blocking statute (to protect EU operators from extra-territorial application of third-country laws), and introducing an EU anti-coercion mechanism are therefore particularly important. While the wind from Washington has turned, it is impossible to rule out a “Trump reloaded” scenario in four years’ time.

However, the US withdrawal also constituted a grave setback for global disarmament efforts. The Trump administration sent a devastating signal around the globe: on the one hand, the US president punished the Iranian regime with the utmost severity, even though it had complied with the JCPOA and verifiably refrained from pursuing atomic weaponry. On the other hand, the US rewarded North Korea’s dictator, who does have the atomic bomb, by organizing summit meetings without any quid pro quo at all.

That makes it all the more significant that we now once again have a reliable partner at our side in the form of Joe Biden, who is committed to diplomacy and arms control. “Build Back Better”, a Biden slogan, should also become the current motto for rebuilding the international arms control system, which has been smashed to smithereens by four years of Trump. Following the extension of the New Start treaty, the United States’ return to the JCPOA is now on the agenda and the US administration has signaled serious intent to take the requisite steps.

It is crucial now that Iran shift its stance too. All the signatory states must work toward this goal, particularly China and Russia. The regime in Tehran has opted for a risky course and is playing with fire. By ramping up uranium enrichment and disregarding other JCPOA obligations, Iran is seriously jeopardizing the agreement’s survival. Iran must return to full compliance with the JCPOA.

However, our conflict with Iran extends far beyond the nuclear issue. In addition to the ballistic missile program, which poses a threat for neighboring countries and beyond, the difficulty arises above all from Iran’s aggressive regional policy, which includes support for terrorist organizations and armed militias in countries such as Syria, Iraq, or Yemen.

The E3, now once again assuming the role of honest broker in the Vienna nuclear negotiations, should also play a decisive role in the requisite negotiations on issues beyond the original nuclear agreement. However, a long-term easing of tensions in the region will only be possible if an agreement is reached between the two hegemonic powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia. We therefore welcome the cautious rapprochement between Tehran and Riyadh, where a rethink has been sparked by the reorientation of US policy under Biden. Reaching a consensus on the Yemen conflict, which has triggered the worst humanitarian crisis of our times, would be an important first step. In the long term it will be vital to create a regional security architecture that builds on such islands of cooperation – even if an agreement on that front appears a rather unrealistic prospect at present.

It is Iranians who have paid the price for developments in recent years, for their lives have become more difficult – not only due to the draconian US sanctions policy, but primarily because of the powers that be in Tehran. In 2019,



when Iranians' rage towards the system, rampant corruption, state mismanagement, and international isolation spilled over into the streets, the regime quashed the mass protests with great bloodshed. Thousands were injured and hundreds killed.

No one should harbor illusions about the nature of the Iranian regime: even under the supposedly moderate Rouhani, human rights have been trampled underfoot, arbitrary arrests and torture have been rife, and minors and homosexuals have been executed.

Irrespective of the outcome of the elections and the Vienna negotiations, the regime in Tehran must be made aware that we will continue to express frank criticism of human rights violations and will adopt sanctions against those responsible, for example via the new EU human rights sanctions mechanism. Our attention is also focused in particular on the situation for dual nationals subjected to politically motivated detention. We demand their immediate release.

WITH LITTLE HOPE FOR CHANGE THROUGH THE BALLOT BOX, IRANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY DEBATES STRATEGY

Activists had seen voting as a way to push for progress, but many are now questioning whether to participate in the upcoming election. Iranian civil society is searching for alternative avenues for change.

Twenty days before Iran's presidential election, the Guardian Council, which vets the candidates, sent shock waves through the political elite and public by disqualifying two prominent figures: the former speaker of parliament, Ali Larijani, and the current vice president, Eshagh Jahangiri. These were just two of the many candidates who were barred from running. The disqualifications will likely boost the chances of an electoral victory for Ebrahim Raisi, a presidential candidate who heads Iran's judiciary and who in 1988 served on a four-person committee that oversaw mass executions of thousands of political prisoners.

Skeptical Iranian political activists, who have at times nonetheless mobilized for participation in elections despite being punished for peaceful dissent, see this as evidence that Iran's ruling authorities – including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – have zero appetite for any political competition in this election. The Guardian Council's decision puts those who argue that participating in the election could facilitate political reform in a difficult position.


Over the past 20 years the Guardian Council, which is not elected by the Iranian people, has disqualified a high number of candidates even remotely affiliated with moderate or reformist factions, as well as candidates likely to campaign on criticism of the authorities' political and social repression. Its recent rulings have led civil society and political activists to jump onto Clubhouse, a social media app for live discussions popular in Iran and the Iranian diaspora, to debate the effectiveness of promoting voting in presidential elections to achieve political change.

FORGING AHEAD, STAYING ON COURSE

By design, Iranian presidential elections are not free and fair. Discriminatory constitutional requirements prohibit non-Muslims from running, and the Guardian Council uses its ever-expanding "approbatory supervision" to disqualify those who deemed not loyal enough to the Islamic Republic's governing ideology of "guardianship of the jurist." These disqualifications have applied not only to the ruling authorities' political opponents, but also to former high-level officials including presidents, and even to Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the most influential political figures in the first 20 years of the Islamic Republic. But in the past the outcome of elections has at least, in most cases, not been predetermined.

In the 1997 presidential elections, for the first time after the initial decade of the Islamic Republic, a candidate was elected on a platform calling for greater political freedoms. The victor, Mohammad Khatami, defeated Aliakbar Nategh Nouri, the candidate presumed to have the backing of the ruling authorities. The Khatami era became known for somewhat greater political and media freedom, an expansion of civil society space, and modest efforts to hold abusive, non-elected bodies and security agencies accountable.

But at the end of his two terms in 2005, Khatami's science minister, Mostafa Moeen, who was backed by some of main reformist parties and ran on a promise of greater respect for human rights, was unable to excite the voter ba-



se when he ran for the presidency. Khatami was succeeded instead by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who reversed many of the modest gains with regard to free expression and assembly.

Since then, and drawing on the difference between the Khatami and Ahmadinejad eras, activists have seen active participation in elections as a means to push for change or to prevent the election of those who advocate for greater restrictions.

In 2009 former prime minister Mirhossein Mousavi and former speaker of parliament Mehdi Karroubi both ran against the Khamenei-backed Ahmadinejad, resulting in a popular mobilization that became known as the Green Movement. The two candidates embraced civil society's demands for greater political and social freedom. The deadly crackdown on the protests against a contested election in which Ahmadinejad was declared the winner resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of hundreds of activists – and house arrest for the candidates who became their leaders. They remain under house arrest today.

In 2013 Hassan Rouhani ran successfully on a two-pillar platform of easing international nuclear-related sanctions and reopening political space. On the campaign trail, he criticized political repression and promised to work to lift the house arrests. Between 2013 and 2016, a rollback of the active repression against students and women's rights defenders allowed civil society to begin repairing the damage done in 2009, though security agencies continued to target a wide array of activists, including dual and foreign nationals.

In the 2017 elections Rouhani pushed the envelope further by presenting himself as an alternative to his challenger, Ebrahim Raisi, whose political vision he characterized as one "which had known only executions and imprisonment for the past 38 years." By raising the rhetorical stakes during the presidential campaign, he managed to mobilize support from civil society actors, including the green movement leaders under house arrest.

But four years later, not only is Rouhani's record of advancing civil and political rights even worse, but forces under his interior ministry have become complicit in serious human rights violations, including in suppressing widespread protests.

Thus in the 2021 presidential elections, in which President Rouhani cannot run again, Iranians are still confronting both the painful economic reality after the reimposition of the US economic sanctions and the repression of dissent by the empowered and unaccountable security agencies.

People will not forget the authorities' crackdown against protesters in November 2019, the most brutal in the history of the Islamic Republic, when security forces shot at protesters with impunity, killing hundreds. Given this, many who encouraged participation in the last presidential election are questioning whether the election of Rouhani brought them any closer to meaningful change.

PUSHING FOR A THIRD WAY?

As Iranian activists inside and outside the country stay up all night and even skip work to stay on Clubhouse, the question they are repeatedly discussing is whether voting to register dissent is an effective tactic when the pool of candidates is so narrow and those who did squeeze by the Guardian Council's arbitrary disqualifications do not represent popular demands for political reform and pluralism.

Even though it was unlikely that the Guardian Council would let him run, the former interior ministry deputy and political prisoner Mostafa Tajzadeh announced his candidacy in the hope of reviving the debate on the "republican" element of Iran's post-revolutionary political system. Several members of women's political parties also tried to encourage the candidacy of Zahra Shojai, an adviser on women's affairs under President Khatami, even though



the Guardian Council has never allowed a woman to run and has intentionally avoided clarifying whether women can run for the presidency.

Some activists have argued that “enough is enough” and that the dismal record of the Islamic Republic, especially after the disqualification of the most visible reformist and moderate candidates, should be sufficient to justify a boycott of an unfair election. Smaller groups are debating the merit of protest votes or votes for candidates that are less favored by the establishment. Meanwhile, a less visible public view rooted in Iran’s embattled civil society is that voters should reject a binary understanding that they should either participate in the election to facilitate democratic change or seek to overthrow a system that has failed to reform itself.

Saeed Madani, a prominent sociologist who also spent time in prison after the 2009 crackdown, has been in various rooms on Clubhouse arguing that forces seeking a democratic transition need to focus on building a social movement backed by civil society. Other activists argue that such strategies should not be merely thought of as political campaigning, but as theories of change that predate and endure beyond election seasons.

If past elections are any guide, the next three weeks could still offer surprises on the electoral scene. But right now, Iranians face one of the most limited choices in a presidential election in the history of the Islamic Republic, and civil society is searching for alternative avenues for change.

DISTRUST AND A NEW PRAGMATISM: SAUDI ARABIA AND THE IRANIAN ELECTIONS

Saudi Arabia is convinced that the president is not the true center of power in Iran. Riyadh's policy of cautious rapprochement to Tehran consequently does not depend on the outcome of the election, and is likely to be maintained in any case.

Saudi Arabia is awaiting the results of Iran's forthcoming presidential elections with a mix of tension and indifference. For a number of reasons, the Islamic Republic has become Saudi Arabia's fiercest rival since the 1979 Revolution. On those grounds alone, Saudi Arabia will be watching the elections closely. However, it is not primarily the elections as such that color Saudi perceptions but instead a conviction that, regardless of its capacity as a nation or state in the actual sense of the term, Iran is relevant as the advocate of an expansionist ideology that threatens the Saudi monarchy. The Saudi leadership is convinced that real power lies not in the hands of the elected president but in the hands of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. From that perspective, the outcome of the elections is seen as scarcely relevant for Iranian politics.

STRUGGLING FOR INFLUENCE: ANTIPATHY, ANTAGONISM, AND APATHY

This perception reflects the contradictory Iranian-Saudi relationship, which is defined by a combination of antipathy, antagonism, and apathy – and, on the Saudi side, by a veritable “Iranioia”.

While the Shiite Islamic Republic has sought to spread its ideas of expansionist political Islam in the region since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Sunni Saudi Arabia sees itself as a counterweight that must thwart Iranian expansionism. Saudi Arabia, with its self-identification as the “guardian of the two holy sites” of Mecca and Medina, likewise seeks to attain a leading role in the Muslim world and views Iran as a threat to its aspirations to exclusivity.

However, their rivalry is not rooted solely in this ideological contest. It also stems from geostrategic, political and economic considerations; both powers are competing for markets and raw materials, seeking regional partnerships and influence. Saudi Arabia views Iran's growing influence in the kingdom's immediate neighborhood with concern. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran has succeeded in carving out a role as the most important force in Iraq. Hezbollah, which is courted by Iran, functions as an important ally for Tehran in Lebanon, just as Hamas does in Palestine and President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. In recent years Iran has also gained influence in Yemen, which is manifested in military and logistical support for the Houthis, who have been at loggerheads with Saudi Arabia since March 2015. Iran's missile program, as well as the role of the Revolutionary Guards as the true masterminds behind Iran's regional policy, further exacerbates Saudi unease. As a result, the kingdom now feels encircled by enemies purportedly controlled by Iran – a threat perception that has dominated the kingdom's policy in the region in recent years.

IRANOIA AS A MEANS OF SECURING POWER

The Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in particular has instrumentalized the traditional view of Iran as the common enemy for his own purposes. Having been appointed defense minister in 2015 and named as direct successor to the throne in 2017, he has served as the kingdom's de facto ruler since 2015 and has stepped out of

the shadow of his aging father, King Salman. Adopting a nationalist course, Muhammad bin Salman has fostered a siege mentality and a form of Saudi patriotism based on modernizing the economy, marginalizing former elites, and, above all, demonizing Iran. In 2018 he even compared Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei to [Hitler](#).

As a result, MbS, as the crown prince is often known, has managed to present himself as the patron saint protecting his people, thus consolidating his power. He has now become the kingdom's personified power center – despite his alleged involvement with the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the largely unsuccessful military intervention in Yemen, or the [blockade](#) against Qatar initiated in June 2017 in conjunction with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt. Although all these factors have damaged his reputation in the West, they have not weakened his position at home. On the contrary, large swathes of the young population continue to see MbS as a beacon of hope who could lead dusty old Saudi Arabia into the modern age.

At the same time, MbS has seen his anti-Iran course confirmed by Donald Trump during the latter's presidency: Trump's policy of exerting "[maximum pressure](#)" on Iran filtered through into the US [withdrawal](#) from the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran and a tougher sanctions policy against Tehran. For the Saudi leadership under then King Abdullah, who perceived the successful nuclear negotiations under Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, as a betrayal that ignored Saudi security interests, this pushback against Iran was a long overdue step. After Trump's first official overseas visit in 2017 surprisingly took him to [Riyadh](#), MbS felt emboldened to push ahead with his own policy of provocation, as reflected in the blockade against Qatar or the coerced resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister [Saad Hariri](#), whom the Saudis accused of being too lenient toward the pro-Iranian Hezbollah. Furthermore, MbS pushed for cautious rapprochement with Israel in order to close ranks against Iran, echoing the axiom that "my enemy's enemy is my friend." Against this backdrop, MbS met with then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in [November 2020](#).

RAPPROCHEMENT AS A NECESSARY EVIL

This phase of Saudi provocations of Iran now seems to have drawn to a close. The most striking indicator is the direct talks between the Saudi and Iranian security services that took place in [April 2021](#) in Baghdad, Iraq. Saudi Arabia now finds itself in a situation in which rapprochement with Iran is perceived as more promising than escalation. Two events, which have each influenced MbS' policy in different ways, are primarily responsible for this [change of course](#).

The Saudi "9/11": On September 14, 2019, Iranian-guided drones and missiles struck the Saudi oil refineries [Abqaiq and Khurais](#). The attack led to a 50% slump in Saudi oil production. Two aspects particularly shocked the Saudi leadership: firstly, it was a painful demonstration of how forcefully Iranian firepower could strike at the heart of the Saudi economy. Secondly, Trump refrained from ordering massive retaliatory strikes. In Saudi Arabia, this incident has also been dubbed the "[Saudi 9/11](#)" and led to a rethink among the Saudi leadership. Apparently, it had underestimated Iran, while from the Saudi perspective a military con-

flict could only be won in close cooperation with Israel and the USA. Saudi Arabia nevertheless has absolutely no interest in a war with Iran. "MbS is the kind of person who runs full speed toward a cliff, but in the end does not jump," said one Saudi analyst of the crown prince's strategy. MbS has relied on provocation, but not on escalation at any price.

Biden's election win: Saudi Arabia has taken a much more conciliatory line since January 2021, when Trump had to hand over the reins of power to Joe Biden, who had adopted a critical stance towards the Saudi leadership during the election campaign and entered into negotiations with Iran on resuming the nuclear deal. The resolution of the conflict with Qatar might be viewed as a welcome gift to Biden. MbS is now presenting himself as an advocate of reconciliation and as an intermediary, for example with regional rivals like Turkey, and he has underlined his willingness to find a [diplomatic solution](#) in Yemen. These friendly overtures aim on the one hand to improve relations with Biden, and on the other hand to establish a foreign policy more independent of the United States. Against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic, Saudi Arabia needs calm in its vicinity to encourage foreign investment to flow into

the country. That is the only way for the kingdom to succeed in diversifying its economy. Crisis and conflict are counterproductive for that goal. To achieve his aims, MbS ultimately needs a pragmatic relationship with Iran and is therefore cautiously – albeit grudgingly – seeking dialogue.

Waves of exchange and pragmatism have always punctuated the complex relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran after 1979: take for example, the [rapprochement](#) with Saudi Arabia under Iranian presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami. Both countries are currently keen to pick up on that process. After all, they are grappling with similar problems: Iran and Saudi Arabia rely on diversifying their economies to move away from oil. If this endeavor does not succeed, they risk not only social frustration but also the destabilization of their political systems. For all their differences, both ruling elites are united by the overriding goal of preserving their own power – at any price.

THE ELECTIONS IN IRAN AND THE “DEEP STATE”

The Saudi leadership is convinced that the presidential elections will not bring about a fundamental change in Iran’s regional policy. While it does fear the potential rise of hardliners who could torpedo the cautious rapprochement process, it is nevertheless convinced that the real decision-making powers lie exclusively with the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guards, not with the elected president. Earlier phases of dialogue have not been able to durably resolve the conflicts between the countries. The view in Riyadh is that this failure is primarily due to unwillingness on the part of the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guards. That explains why the outcome of the election is not seen as a decisive factor that would bring about a change in Iranian policy toward Saudi Arabia.

It also partly explains why the current bilateral talks involve the intelligence services rather than the foreign ministries. There is a conviction that only Iran’s “deep state” is capable of influencing the Islamic Republic’s policy in the region and curtailing support for Iran’s allies in Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon.

The Iranian president and his government can certainly provide support for the rapprochement process. How

ever, in Riyadh’s view, only the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guards are in a position to take the ultimate decisions on dialogue or demonization, rapprochement or rejection. That appraisal is unlikely to change in the future. Consequently, Saudi Arabia is likely to press ahead with its cautious policy of tactical rapprochement, irrespective of the outcome of the Iranian presidential elections.

AN EVOLVING CRESCENDO WITH A GRAND FINALE: ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN IRAN

Short, intense, and yet very impactful – election campaign periods are quite distinctive in Iranian politics.

We are only a few weeks from June 18th, when the 13th presidential election of the Islamic Republic, founded in 1979, will be held in Iran. There has, however, been no euphoria so far: Iran's population is enduring a crisis-ridden period with multiple sociopolitical tensions and an acute economic downturn.

Although the U.S. sanctions regime is cited as one of the main reasons for these crises, Iranians also hold their own political elite responsible. This is reflected in clearly perceptible political apathy. In telephone interviews on the presidential election conducted in April by the student polling institute ISPA, [only 43%](#) of respondents said they intended to vote. The state broadcaster IRIB has its own polls indicating that 51% of the population has no intention of participating in the elections. Disenchantment with politics is one explanation for these low figures, but it is also important to bear in mind that Iran is currently undergoing its fourth COVID-19 wave. This will affect voter turnout on election day, as well as the election campaigns that are slowly but surely beginning.


Elections in Iran are characterized, inter alia, by very short election campaigns that begin unassumingly but gather speed as they move toward their conclusion, akin to a musical crescendo. The closer it is to election day, the more dynamism the election campaign develops. In previous elections, the overall mood among the electorate has tilted in a particular direction only in the final days before the election. That is one reason why it is almost impossible to predict the outcome of elections in Iran, particularly when the head of state will certainly change – having served two terms in office, the incumbent president Hassan Rouhani is not allowed to stand for re-election.

There have been surprises in the past: it should be noted that Mohammad Khatami, a Reformist, won in 1997 contrary to all expectations, while in 2005 commentators had not reckoned with Principlist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. And in 2013 future president Hassan Rouhani scored just 6% in opinion polls ten days before the election.

Contrary to a whole host of gloomy assertions, the short election campaign phase is therefore highly significant. That means it merits a closer look.

IN THE MEDIA (BROADCASTERS, PRINT MEDIA, ONLINE)

Despite the red lines for public discourse in the Islamic Republic, the state media do feature controversial discussions on domestic and foreign policy issues. In this context, the Iranian media landscape's fragmentation along political lines is significant. With the exception of a few economic, cultural, and sports media outlets, all news media are largely or entirely affiliated with a political figure or a political group. In the absence of effective political parties and party manifestos, these media outlets play a particularly significant role in conveying political messages and concepts into the public discourse. Current affairs are thus constantly packaged in narratives intended to serve the interests of various political camps.



Iranian state television tends to place greater emphasis on diverse media content in the run-up to elections. However, this content also tends to mirror elite discourse rather than reflect the general public's concerns. The latter are instead espoused by satellite channels operating from abroad, some with considerable audience share within Iran. However, those channels are not unproblematic either, given their questionable financing models (especially in the case of "Iran International") and tendency to disregard international journalistic standards. Nevertheless, they undoubtedly influence political debates in the country.

PROVINCIAL TRIPS

Compared to interaction in the digital realm, personal exchanges on the ground have a much more immediate impact. During his presidency, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad established the practice of visiting the country's 30 provinces as an effective way to assert his presence in regions far from the capital. Ahmadinejad had many imitators on this front, even though there is no certainty that every trip garnered a significant number of additional votes.

In this context, it is telling that Ebrahim Raisi, now the outgoing head of the judiciary, has traveled to 28 of Iran's 30 provinces during his two years in office (since March 2019) – highly unusual for a judiciary chief, but entirely logical in light of his presidential ambitions.

Iran is certainly a centrally governed country, with the capital, Tehran, as its political epicenter. Looking at the country as a whole, however, reveals that voter turnout is lower in urban centers than in rural areas. ISPA currently reports a 43% to 59% difference. That means that traveling to remote provinces can help a candidate with a well-conceived political program come across as a unifying figure and tap into new constituencies.

Renowned Supporters and "Kingmakers"

In past elections, figures from the political elite, referred to as "kingmakers", have always played an important role in election campaigns. In 2013, for example, one hallmark of Hassan Rouhani's success in the elections was the last-minute boost he received when former President Mohammad Khatami offered his support just two days before the election. The late Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani also added his political heft to Rouhani's candidacy. However, there is no longer anyone on the scene with that kind of political gravitas, which means there are currently no true "president makers."

Meanwhile, given the current political apathy among the Iranian public, the wave of support that emerged in 2017 from cultural and sporting celebrities for Rouhani's re-election is unlikely to materialize this time. While well-known clerics can mobilize only a limited number of votes, their support for particular candidates may increase these would-be presidents' prestige among the political elite. On that front, former Speaker of Parliament and presidential candidate Ali Larijani has received particularly extensive backing from renowned Grand Ayatollahs of Qom.

AN EVOLVING CRESCENDO WITH RALLIES, STREET CAMPAIGNING AND TV DEBATES

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is highly improbable that the candidates will have a chance this year to organize gatherings in sports indoor arenas, stadiums, and public squares – and if such events do take place, they will involve a much smaller audience. Rallies in general, which are sometimes major spectacles, used to illustrate the candidates' strength and popularity. They also testified to the electorate's dynamism. This important part of the crescendo, which typically culminates in lively marches through urban centers on the last day of the election campaign, is almost inconceivable this year.



The usual feedback loop between street campaigning and TV debates may well not emerge this year. Nevertheless, the TV duels between the candidates will once again be critical. Experience from past elections suggests that the main candidates from the two camps will be backed up during the debates by one or two colleagues who are also approved as candidates but in the end withdraw from the race. In 2017, Eshagh Jahangiri and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf in particular played that role for Hassan Rouhani and Ebrahim Raisi. A similar process is likely to play out again this year, depending on which candidates the Guardian Council allows to run in the end.

The length of the actual election campaign will ultimately depend on whether the Guardian Council comes to a final decision after just five days of vetting and announces the approved candidates on May 21st or takes five more days and only gives the starting signal for the election campaign on May 26th – just three weeks before the election. It's hard to imagine that this campaign will cause voter turnout to shoot back up to well over 60% or 70%. Still, if there is anything the last twelve rounds of presidential elections have had in common, is that they have all borne surprises.

AGAINST ALL ODDS – IRANIAN WOMEN WILL CONTINUE TO PUSH FOR CHANGE

The outgoing president failed to deliver on his bold promises to improve women's rights, and the next government is also unlikely to advance legal reforms or social and economic opportunities. But women in Iran will nevertheless fight for improved rights and more equality.

Women and their issues rarely figure prominently in Iranian presidential elections. Women's groups did manage, however, to infuse the political discourse with their more pressing demands during several [previous elections](#). This year, though, the lack of attention to women's demands, the superficial mention of a few issues in presidential debates, and the inability of candidates to even articulate minimally coherent policy proposals in response to women's long-standing demands have demonstrated a serious regression, which can be attributed in great part to the absence of the independent women's movement from the political scene and discussions.


Repression and marginalization are certainly to blame for this absence, but a sense of disillusionment, hopelessness, and apathy towards a political process that doesn't respond to the demands of its citizens (especially women) is also a major factor. Like many other Iranians, women's movement activists feel a sense of apathy towards the political process. The origins of this apathy include the state's bloody crackdowns against protesters in [November 2019](#) and [December 2017](#), the downing of the Ukraine plane and the state's lack of transparency and [accountability](#) on that issue, rising inflation, a poor economy, and increased corruption.

Beyond the political system's broader shortcomings, the [unrealized campaign promises](#) of President Rouhani have also played a significant role in the decision of many movement activists to remain on the margins of the political process and to stay home on election day. Chief among those unfulfilled promises was Rouhani's assurance to reduce the state's securitized approach toward citizens. In fact, Rouhani's ministry of intelligence and the Islamic Republic's Revolutionary Guards have targeted women and other civil society activists at an unprecedented rate.

Many activists have lamented on social media that the Rouhani presidency, especially during his second term, was more repressive than the presidency of the hardliner Ahmadinejad. Women's groups have come under fire, their non-government organizations have been shut down, and scores of activists [have been arrested](#). The authorities have made the process of establishing NGOs even more restrictive than before.

Rouhani also failed to keep some of his most frequently vocalized promises, such as the establishment of a ministry of women's affairs, the appointment of a female minister, preventing the morality police from harassing women for the way they are dressed, and facilitating women's entry into sports stadiums, to name a few. What's more, other seriously regressive policies, such as increased restrictions on women's access to birth control and limitations on their reproductive rights, were pursued with greater vigor under the Rouhani administration, albeit by order of Iran's supreme leader.

Some positive but limited [developments in support of women](#) – such as the introduction and adoption of a bill allowing women to pass on their nationality to their children, small loans programs for women entrepreneurs, and efforts to increase the number of women in mid-level managerial government positions – did occur during Rouhani's presidency. Still, these limited efforts paled in comparison to Rouhani's general lack of support for women's empowerment and a gendered approach to governance. Further, Rouhani's failure to support his VP for women's affairs, Shahindokht Molaverdi, who was under serious and constant attack by hardline forces throughout her ten



ure for being a “feminist,” made it clear to women that Rouhani was not committed to ending the serious and long-standing legal and social discrimination against women. It appears that his campaign promises were, more than anything, a means to garner votes.

The reformists who have consistently claimed, more in words than through deeds, to support women’s rights were largely silent over the past few years. They failed to hold Rouhani, a moderate candidate elected with support of reformist parties, to account for his failure to meet many of his campaign promises to women.

These shortcomings and disappointments have contributed to the absence of women activists from the political process and their refusal to articulate a set of demands or engage with reformists in the 2021 presidential elections. This has meant that no broader platforms in support of women’s rights were developed as part of the reformists’ campaign agendas.


This loss of ground was ironic given that this year marked the first time a reformist political party had backed a female candidate in the presidential elections. [Zahra Shoajee](#), a reformist politician and the advisor to former president Khatami on women’s affairs, sought to run for president as one of 14 candidates put forth on the reformist consensus ballot. Her candidacy was seen as an effort to continue a long-running challenge to the Guardian Council, which refuses to clarify whether women can be elected as president. Needless to say, Shoajee, along with all other reformist candidates, was disqualified through the Guardian Council’s vetting process. The reason for her disqualification was not announced, meaning that the challenge and lack of clarity on the issue of women presidents will continue.

WOMEN MINISTERS AND HIGH-LEVEL APPOINTMENTS FOR WOMEN

One of the issues that did figure somewhat prominently in the discussions leading up to the presidential campaign and the official debates was the appointment of female ministers. Reformist women politicians have long demanded progress on this issue – as well as the appointment of women to other high-level decision-making roles in government – in order to address long-standing discrimination against women. Independent women’s movement activists added their voice to this particular demand in recent elections, namely in 2016 during Rouhani’s bid for a second term and through the [Campaign to Change the Male Face of the Parliament](#), during which they encouraged women to run in the 2016 parliamentary elections.

Many reformist women and men continue to argue that women in positions of power would push for positive change for women. However, given the sensitivity and difficulty of advocating for women’s rights, the few women in high-level positions have not managed to achieve any significant progress on women’s rights. The theory actually backfired when Leila Vaseghi, the Rouhani-appointed municipal governor of Shahre-Qods, admitted to [ordering the police](#) to shoot protesters who entered the municipal building during the 2019 protests.

The issue of female ministers received much attention during Khatami’s two terms as president. Khatami, who was elected in large part because of the votes of women, chose not to take on the task of appointing a female minister, given its “sensitive” nature. Instead, he appointed Massoumeh Ebtekar as the first female vice president in charge of the department of environment for two terms. Rouhani, who twice ran on the promise of appointing women to ministerial positions and establishing a ministry of women’s affairs, also failed to meet his campaign promises. The only president who managed to appoint a female minister was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He made Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi the first and to date the only female minister in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. To the dismay of women, she held this unique position as part of an administration that systematically pushed back on women’s gains. An obstetrician-gynecologist, Dastjerdi held the distinction of being the lone female minister of health during a time when Iran dismantled its long-running, successful, and internationally acclaimed [family planning program](#) and introduced serious limitations on women’s reproductive rights.



One reason why the appointment of female ministers garnered more attention than other issues in the 2021 presidential debates is that reformist women had continually demanded progress on this issue over the last few years and in the months leading up to the election, to the exclusion of almost all other demands related to women's rights. In fact, ministerial appointments and election of a female president characterized much of reformist women's discussions during the lead up to campaigns, including discussions held on social media with candidate Zahra Shojaee.

THE REFORMISTS' LACK OF A COMPREHENSIVE POLITICAL AGENDA FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS


In the absence of the resolve to force reformist candidates and parties to articulate and insist on a comprehensive set of demands in support of women's rights or the ability to infuse the broader political debate with a discourse in support of basic rights for women, this incessant focus on the appointment of women to high-level decision-making positions seems more akin to an effort to share political power than a commitment to support women's advancement and address discrimination.

During the presidential debates, conservative candidate Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi ridiculed the idea of appointing female ministers. Hashemi criticized commitments by reformist candidate Mehralizadeh and moderate candidate Hemmati, who respectively promised to appoint three and five female ministers if elected and if allowed. In jest, Hashemi claimed that his entire cabinet would be [comprised of women ministers](#) if it meant being elected. He then sharpened his critique, stressing the importance of appointing people based on merit rather than gender. This has been a staple argument of conservatives (and some reformists) countering demands for affirmative action to help women into high-level government positions.

As if that wasn't enough, in a televised rant in response to criticisms launched against his administration's record, Rouhani too ridiculed the focus on women. "It is only the government that is bad, the rest of the [system] is fine," [he lamented in response to televised](#) presidential debates, "we hear better things these days too, how women are [all of a sudden] good, we have to pay attention to women and their rights... Let us not insult the intelligence of the public... they know better." These reactions hammered home the point for many women that commitments to appoint female ministers don't reflect a genuine commitment on the part of male politicians, reformist or conservative, to support women's demands for equality and are instead intended to win votes and then perhaps share political power with female politicians.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The need to address Iran's economic crisis was an important and central issue to the presidential debates. It was unfortunate, then, that all the presidential hopefuls overlooked the need for a discussion on women's specific economic concerns. Before the pandemic the workforce participation rate for Iranian women was at [17% percent](#), which is one of the lowest worldwide. Iran's economic crisis has hit Iranian women especially hard. In the first six months following the COVID-19 pandemic [women lost over 700,000 jobs](#), i.e. nearly 15% of employed women lost their jobs. Women have continued to experience a decline in their employment rates throughout the COVID pandemic. While the candidates discussed improving the economy for Iranian families and addressing the livelihood crisis that many Iranians are facing, none mentioned the devastating economic situation of women, especially those heading households. Hemmati, the moderate candidate, who is an economist and former head of Iran's Central Bank, provided the most comprehensive and technical plans to move Iran out of economic crisis. On several occasions during the debates he discussed the need to economically engage a wide sector of society, but he failed to offer any plans or solutions with respect to engaging women in the workforce.



Hemmati and the reform candidate Mehralizadeh tried to address the issue of the hijab, one of the more high-profile concerns of Iranian women. But instead of tackling the issue head on, they chose to dance around it. Hemmati criticized the monitoring of women's dress and vowed that the harassment of women for their dress, [which has led to violent encounters](#) between police and women, would end under his watch. But he refused to commit to dismantling the morality police, which was a bold step taken by the reformist Khatami. The conservative candidate Rezaiee put forth a proposal to provide stay-at-home women with an income, but he failed to explain his plan any further and provide ideas on how he would do so.

Candidates also failed to take up other longtime issues of concern to women, such as the need to push for reforms to laws that discriminate against women or to address the violence against them. As in many other countries, in Iran violence against women spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic. Along these lines, candidates failed to mention, much less commit to, the adoption and implementation of a law to [protect female survivors of violence](#), a measure that had been in the works for 10 years and was finally submitted to parliament by the Rouhani administration as a last-minute effort. The measure was severely watered down by committees in parliament and by the judiciary since its introduction, but it has still not been passed into law.

PUSHING FOR CHANGE AGAINST ALL ODDS

Even before the elections, the future for Iranian women did not offer much promise in the way of legal reform or increased social and economic opportunities. In general, given the sensitive nature of advocating women's rights in Iran and the resistance of part of the state to women's advancement, serious political will is needed in order to make real change in support of women's rights. But conservatives do not seem to possess this political will, nor in fact do the reformists who have long claimed to stand with women.

Now, under a Raisi presidency, the situation will likely be especially bleak for women. He represents an ultra-conservative segment of Iranian society that believes that men and women complement one another for biological reasons and should therefore have different roles and enjoy different rights. This ideology also actively promotes, through incentives and disincentives, the idea that a woman's primary role is to be a wife and mother. If the experience of Iranian women during the time of Ahmadinejad is any indication, the next four or perhaps eight years will bring serious pushback on women's gains, with the state taking steps to limit women's access to higher education and employment. Additionally, pro-natalist policies that severely restrict women's access to reproductive health services will be pursued with vigor by a conservative administration, which will likely advocate and push for marriage at earlier ages through incentive programs. Currently the average age of marriage for women is around 25 years, but there has been an [alarming increase](#) in early marriages and even child marriages. Under Raisi's government, we are sure to see further increases in the rate of child marriages. Needless to say, civil society and especially women's organization will continue to face serious pressure and crackdowns.

Despite the bleak outlook, one can never underestimate the power of Iranian women, who have resisted some of the most regressive policies targeting their rights over the last 43 years, pushing to remove red lines and redefine social norms in the face of serious legal and cultural discrimination. In discussions on social media (especially Clubhouse), Iranian women activists are already putting forth ideas for how to advocate for and create change, with a special focus on influencing the thinking of a younger generation of Iranians. They recognize that, despite the extremely difficult road ahead, the next four or eight years will also be a time of transition that may indeed offer unexpected opportunities for advancing women's rights. In other words, Iranian women, and especially activists, are already committing to an intense fight. They are intent on maintaining past gains while pushing for improved rights and more equality.

TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE: ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN IRAN

The majority of the Iranian population may stay away from the ballot box this year. Yet that does not render presidential elections meaningless.

When Iran holds its 13th presidential election on June 18th, over 59 million eligible voters will once again face the question of whether to participate. After all, there are clear limitations to elections in the Islamic Republic. Free and fair elections – in which, the rules of political competition are equally applied to all or an independent commission ensures a legitimate process – do not exist. Most Iranian citizens are barred from the presidency. As laid out in the constitution, presidents must adhere to the state religion (Shiism); religious minorities cannot run. Moreover, only people among the country's well-known religious and political figures (*rejal-e mashabi va siyasi*) can hold the presidency. Women have so far been excluded even though it is disputed whether the term “*rejal*” refers to men exclusively.


The body that claims the authority to interpret such provisions is the Guardian Council. The Council consists of six clerics and six jurists who, unlike the president or parliament, are not directly elected by the people. While its original mandate was to generally oversee various elections according to Article 99 of the constitution, the Council laid out its own [understanding of Article 99](#) in 1992, declaring its responsibility for the approval and rejection of candidates as well. Today the Guardian Council is the central institution that controls access to political power.

Dominated by conservatives and hardliners, it regularly excludes thousands of potential candidates from elections, without being publicly accountable. Women in particular as well as so-called reformists and pragmatists have been most affected by the Council's decision making.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

Iranian presidential elections are significant not as a means of political competition, but rather as a national event with the potential to create social impetus in a variety of ways. The weeks before elections are traditionally periods of intensified socio-political discourse. Election campaigns have often brought controversial topics into the public eye and broken long-standing taboos, especially during live debates on TV. Social media has long been a common medium for debate, and over the past few months the audio platform Clubhouse in particular has gained traction. Reformist candidate Mostafa Tajzadeh, who will most likely be disqualified by the Guardian Council, has used Clubhouse to draw greater attention to contentious issues such as reforming the constitution and limiting the term of office of the Supreme Leader.

Furthermore, the overall role of the Guardian Council is inevitably discussed and criticized around election time. Thus the approach of an election opens up political space to expose systemic injustices and take counteraction. Time and again, Iranian women have attempted to run as candidates, openly challenging the Council. Until her death in 2019, former journalist and member of parliament Azam Taleghani registered a total of five times for presidential elections, most recently in 2017. Another 136 women tried to run that year, without success. Although the speaker of the Guardian Council, Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei, has publicly asserted on several occasions that [women](#)



are not legally barred from the presidency, this has not been reflected in the council's decision-making practice to date. Despite all the setbacks, [another 40 women have entered the race again this year](#), maintaining the pressure on the Council.

Finally, elections are also periods of volatility in which unexpected sociopolitical developments can emerge. This was the case in 2009, when hundreds of thousands of citizens – and even part of the political elite – took to the streets in the wake of the highly disputed re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and openly accused the state of electoral fraud. Many viewed the official result as a blatant violation of the principle that, while the system determines the candidates, the citizens select the winner.

TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic, the majority of Iranian voters have regularly taken part in elections – despite clear institutional limitations and practical constraints on political competition. Presidential elections have achieved an average turnout of over 70 %. This indicates that, contrary to widespread assumptions abroad, many Iranians believed the outcome had a direct impact on their daily lives. Not all of those voters were supporters of the state; even Iranians who are critical of the system or opposed to it in its entirety have voted at times.

The reasons why citizens in autocratic systems participate in elections are manifold. They range from hoping for gradual political change, to preventing specific candidates from taking over, to simply trying to improve their general livelihoods. This year, however, the Islamic Republic may see a record low in voter turnout. In a May poll conducted by state broadcaster IRIB, [51% of respondents said they did not intend to vote](#). Only 33% were certain they were going to participate. Previously, in a survey conducted in April by the Iranian polling agency ISPA, [less than half of respondents](#) said they planned to cast a ballot.

Frustration and disappointment are running high among the population. Numerous attempts at reform have failed. People suffer from mismanagement, widespread corruption, high unemployment, a general lack of prospects for large parts of the younger generation, ongoing state repression, and restrictions on personal freedoms. All too often expectations for political change have been raised only to remain unfulfilled, most recently under President Hassan Rouhani, who was generally considered a moderate. The desperation felt by many Iranians was evident in the nationwide protests of 2017/18 and 2019/20, which were suppressed by the state in the most violent crackdown in decades. Hundreds of protesters were killed and thousands more arrested. The already poor state of the economy was exacerbated by a draconian U.S. sanctions regime (since 2018) and the outbreak of the Corona crisis (since 2020).

Today, as in nearly all Iranian elections, calls for a boycott can once again be loudly heard. Numerous prominent critics of the political conditions, such as former MP Faezeh Hashemi (daughter of former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani) or human rights defender Narges Mohammadi, are explicitly opposed to participating. Even former advocates of voting, such as Tehran University professor Sadegh Zibakalam, have now given up on [elections as a means of political change](#).

OUTLOOK

While it is likely that a majority of the electorate will abstain from voting, it is by no means certain. Indeed, presidential elections have often brought surprises. Many Iranians may wait to make their final decision until they know which candidates the Guardian Council will admit. However, reformists in particular will likely struggle to mobilize voters. Reformist candidates such as Tajzadeh have been criticized for not being able to present a political program



or a viable strategy, as well as for their general failure to provide solutions to pressing economic and sociopolitical issues. It remains unclear why Tajzadeh or any other reform-oriented candidate would be able to succeed where every incumbent since the reformers' first election victory in 1997 has failed. Many Iranians no longer believe that the system can be reformed at all.

Some voters might stay away from the ballot box out of apathy; others might see boycotting as an act of protest and as the most effective tool to deny the state the legitimacy it desires and to cause it international humiliation. It is uncertain, however, whether the official figures on voter turnout will truly reflect the mood of the population. Lower voter turnout could be attributed to the corona crisis, and the actual number of cast votes cannot be reliably determined given the lack of independent monitoring.

Whether or not a majority of Iranian citizens turn their backs on the elections, casting a vote should not be misconstrued as unequivocal support of the system, nor will taking part in elections prevent Iranians from continuing to push for social and political changes beyond the ballot box.

EVERYTHING STAYS THE SAME: AN ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE ON THE IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION


Israeli politicians of all stripes maintain that the political leanings of Iran's next president won't change the strategic picture.

At a rally in support of the Palestinians, held in Tehran on the occasion of "Global Jerusalem Day" on August 2, 2013, then-recently elected President of Iran Hassan Rouhani declared that the occupation of Palestine and Jerusalem was "[an old wound on the body of the Islamic world](#)." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [was quick to respond](#) to the new Iranian president's remarks, saying that "Rouhani's true face has been exposed earlier than expected... These remarks should awaken the world from the illusion that has taken hold on some since the elections in Iran." Speaking to the UN General Assembly two months later, Netanyahu [addressed the new president](#), saying, "Rouhani doesn't sound like [his hardline predecessor Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad, but when it comes to Iran's nuclear weapons program, the only difference between them is this: Ahmadinejad was a wolf in wolf's clothing; Rouhani is a wolf in sheep's clothing."

Rouhani's surprising and sweeping victory in the 2013 election marked an important turning point in Iranian politics. As one of the founders of the Iranian regime who had served in many senior roles, including some sensitive security posts, Rouhani had been considered a pragmatic conservative by observers at home and abroad. In his public statements he took a different approach from his predecessor to both domestic and foreign affairs, even expressing some criticism of Iran's conduct in nuclear negotiations with the West. The new president's attitude toward Israel and the Jews would also change shortly after his election, despite the statement on Global Jerusalem Day, as he adopted more moderate rhetoric and seemed to be less obsessed with the Israeli issue than his predecessor had been.

Nevertheless, Israeli officials, and [especially Prime Minister Netanyahu](#), vehemently rejected the possibility of real change in Iran after Rouhani's election for two main reasons. First, that an Iranian president has only limited scope to break with the Islamic Republic's core ideological principles or to effect a significant change in its policies – this is the because of the structure of the Iranian establishment, including an electoral process that does not allow for free and fair elections as well as the imbalance of power between the president and the supreme leader. Second, that an Iranian president is constrained in their ability to deviate from the regime's official line on the key issues that affect Israel, including Iran's nuclear and long-range missile programs as well as its malign regional activity. In the wake of the regional upheaval over the past decade, including Rouhani's tenure over the last eight years, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) have significantly increased their involvement throughout the Middle East as well as their power to shape the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, especially in the near abroad.

Iran's hostility toward Israel remains one of the most consistent and uncompromising elements of the official policy of the Islamic Republic. Senior Iranian officials, led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, continue to express a hard-line anti-Israel stance that openly calls for Israel's destruction. There is almost complete consensus on this issue on the part of the main political factions in Iran. Even reformist President Mohammad Khatami, who expressed a more pragmatic and moderate line in Iran's attitude toward Israel and stressed in the 1990s that Iran had no interest in interfering in the peace process between Israel and its neighbors and should focus instead on its domestic concerns, spoke strongly of the need to return all Palestinian refugees to Israel and hold a referendum among the [original](#)



[inhabitants of Palestine](#) in order to determine its fate. This understanding of “original inhabitants” excludes most of Israel’s Jewish residents and thus the proposal is tantamount to the elimination of Israel as a Jewish Zionist state. Of course, Iran’s hostility to Israel is not confined to statements alone. Under all presidents, whether hardliners or pragmatists, Iran has continued its efforts to encourage, promote, and assist terrorist and military activities against Israel by Palestinian organizations and by Hezbollah, working to entrench itself either directly or through its proxies along Israel’s borders.

Regarding Iran’s nuclear program, Rouhani adopted a more pragmatic approach than his predecessor. Contrary to the aggressive line presented by Ahmadinejad, Rouhani sought to move toward the goal of becoming a nuclear threshold state gradually and while minimizing the economic and political costs to Iran. Although secret talks between Iran and the United States began during President Ahmadinejad’s tenure, with approval from the supreme leader, there is no doubt that Rouhani’s election enabled the negotiations that resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in July 2015.

The Iran nuclear deal, however, triggered fierce criticism from the Israeli government and was characterized by Prime Minister Netanyahu as a “[historic mistake](#).” Israel has spearheaded the efforts to delay Iran’s nuclear program, oppose the JCPOA, and encourage President Donald Trump’s “maximum pressure” strategy. In recent weeks Netanyahu has apparently sought to complicate and thwart the indirect talks between the United States and Iran over a reciprocal return to full compliance with the JCPOA by continuing [Israeli activities](#) against Iran’s nuclear sites and [emphasizing that Israel would not be bound](#) by a nuclear deal between world powers and Iran.

In addition to its political efforts, Israel is continuing covert activities to delay Iran’s nuclear progress and possibly also the diplomatic efforts. In this context, the election of a hardline president in the upcoming election might actually be in line with Israel’s interests (as perceived by Netanyahu). The election of a conservative president would not necessarily prevent a return to the nuclear deal, which depends largely on the Iranian supreme leader’s decision. It might, however, pose further difficulties in advancing the negotiations if there is no deal before the Iranian elections; and it might frustrate the possibility of a return to the JCPOA, which is viewed by Israel as a worst-case scenario because it believes that the deal would pave the way for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons when the sunset clauses expire. In addition, the election of a hardline president would complicate any rapprochement at the regional level, especially in light of the IRGC’s regional aspirations.

On the other hand, Israel likely feels that the election of a pragmatic president would present a significant challenge because a president who heralds the possibility (or at least the appearance) of improvement in Iran’s behavior might encourage a more positive international attitude towards Iran (i.e., potentially less sanctions and isolation, more economic exchanges, etc.). There is no doubt that a hardline president who uses belligerent rhetoric, openly calls for the destruction of Israel, and adopts hawkish positions would serve Israeli efforts to mobilize the international community against the Islamic Republic.

Iran and Israel are currently engaged in a complex and multi-dimensional campaign. While hostility towards Israel continues to be an important component of Iran’s official policy, it seems that Israel, and especially under its current prime minister, has a fundamental interest in maintaining friction with Iran both because it genuinely considers Iran a potentially existential threat due to the specific nature of its political regime and because friction serves some personal political interests. It seems that Netanyahu has exploited the continued confrontation between Iran and Israel to a certain degree in order to distract the Israeli public from his political and judicial problems and to present himself as the only Israeli leader capable of successfully dealing with the Iranian threat.

Yet even if Netanyahu were to leave office, it is doubtful that his successor would adopt a fundamentally different approach towards Iran. On the Iranian issue, there are no tangible differences between politicians in mainstream Israeli politics. Both Israel’s military campaign against Iran’s entrenchment’s efforts in Syria and its covert activities against Iran’s nuclear program are supported by most Israeli politicians across the political spectrum. Another prime



minister might adopt slightly different rhetoric towards Iran, downplay belligerent statements against it, and perhaps even deprioritize the Iranian issue. However, the Israeli view of Iran as a strategic threat is not expected to change, nor will Israel's determination to continue its efforts against Iran's nuclear program, missile capabilities, and regional activities.

If a more pragmatic president is elected in Iran, Israel will probably claim that strategic decisions in Iran are made by Khamenei and thus there will be no change in its policies. If a hardline president is elected, Israel will probably argue that the entire Iranian leadership has fallen under the control of radicals and that the international community should mobilize against Iran more than ever before. Be that as it may, as long as the two countries consider their ongoing confrontation a zero-sum game – with Iran unwilling to recognize Israel's right to exist, and Israel reluctant to acknowledge Iran's vital interests – then the Iran-Israel conflict is likely to continue regardless of the political leanings of Iran's next president.

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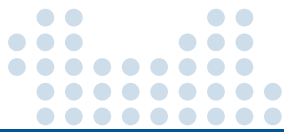
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