

Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi: Former President of Iran

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Ebrahim Raisi

Ebrahim Raisi ascended steadily through the ranks of the Islamic Republic of Iran until his unexpected death in May of 2024. Spending most of his career in the judiciary, three factors can explain Raisi's rise: promotion by Iran's [Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#), an influential family network, and a knack for leveraging state positions to feed his ambition. Raisi spent his career developing his image as an anti-corruption crusader—a **selective crusade which did not target his close allies**. In recent years, Raisi emerged as a leading candidate to succeed the 84-year-old Khamenei, but this speculation was cut short by his untimely death. His presidency was defined by the increasing influence of hardline-dominated centers of power, including [the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#).

Raisi's Early Years

[Born](#) on December 14, 1960, in Mashhad, Iran, Raisi's father [died](#) when he was five. He later entered the Qom Seminary, where he made a strong early impression. At the dawn of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Raisi [says](#) he was selected to be one of 70 students to take part in courses on Khomeinist governance. It was there that Raisi first met Ali Khamenei, as one of his students. At the time, Khamenei's career in the regime was just beginning, having been named by Iran's founding [Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini](#) to multiple posts, including deputy defense minister and Friday prayer leader of Tehran.

That connection helped jumpstart Raisi's rapid rise to power. He first [became](#) the prosecutor-general in Karaj at the age of 20. Media accounts at the time detail the harrowing use of executions in Karaj—with one [case](#) involving four women accused of prostitution and six men accused of possession of illegal drugs being executed by firing squads. In other cases, an anti-regime protester was [executed](#), as were [members](#) of the Baha'i faith.

Raisi then became prosecutor-general of Hamedan. It was during this period—in [1983](#)—that Raisi married Jamileh Alamolhoda, the daughter of conservative Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda. When his daughter met Raisi, Alamolhoda was already a fixture inside the regime, having served as the [head](#) of a revolutionary komiteh in Tehran and as a senior official at Imam Sadiq University. Alamolhoda would eventually [rise](#) to become the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad in 2005 and later the Supreme Leader's representative to Razavi Khorasan Province in 2016. He also became a mentor to rising personalities in Tehran, including [Saeed Jalili](#), for whom Alamolhoda served as a dissertation [advisor](#) at Imam Sadiq University. Thus, Raisi's family connection to Alamolhoda—especially given his own father's death at a young age—was instrumental in promoting his career.

In 1985, Raisi was transferred to Tehran, where he was appointed deputy prosecutor-general. The capital city of Tehran was a significant assignment for Raisi, who was still in his 20s. Raisi served as deputy to two chief prosecutors-general, Ali Razini and Morteza Eshraghi, from 1985-89. He appears to have modeled parts of his career after Razini and Eshraghi. Razini later [served](#) as chief

judge of the Special Court for Clergy, where Raisi would later become prosecutor-general. While serving under Eshraghi during his tenure as prosecutor-general of Tehran, Raisi received an infamous—and in regime terms, invaluable—opportunity in 1988, working as a member of a “death commission” established after the end of the Iran-Iraq War to review the cases of political prisoners, which resulted in mass executions.

There is evidence Raisi was treated as Eshraghi’s equal on the commission—specifically, a [letter](#) written by then-deputy Supreme Leader Hossein Ali Montazeri in 1988 was addressed, in part, to both Eshraghi and Raisi. Such correspondence from someone of Montazeri’s rank signaled Raisi’s heightened profile. In the letter, Montazeri blasted the Tehran death commission, [saying](#), “[w]e are upset by the crimes of monafeqin in the west [of the country] and we are taking this out on captives and former prisoners. However, executing them when they have not engaged in any new activity means undermining all our judges and past judgments. On what basis do you execute someone whom you have already sentenced to a punishment lesser than the death penalty?”

Raisi’s importance on the commission was once again confirmed in an audio recording of a meeting he [participated](#) in with Montazeri in 1988. Montazeri is heard [saying](#), “[i]n my view, the biggest crime in the Islamic Republic, for which the history will condemn us, has been committed at your hands, and they’ll write your names as criminals in the history.” But it was Montazeri, rather than Raisi, who was condemned and sidelined, later being [removed](#) from his post as deputy Supreme Leader, while Raisi was promoted to chief prosecutor-general of Tehran in 1989. Raisi’s promotion incidentally coincided with Ali Khamenei’s ascension to the Supreme Leadership and his installation of a new chief justice—Mohammad Yazdi. Thus, Raisi was likely seen as sufficiently loyal to Khamenei as the new Supreme Leader, and his associates began to wield authority over Iran’s judiciary.

During Raisi’s tenure as chief prosecutor, he continued to be one of the Islamic Republic’s chief enablers in purging political dissidents. For example, one Human Rights Watch report [indicated](#) that in 1990 he “ordered the arrest of more than 30 signatories of an open letter to President Rafsanjani,” which criticized his policies, particularly the ban of the Iran Freedom Movement, led by former Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan. He also [ordered](#) the dissolution of the Association for the Defense of Freedom and Sovereignty of the Iranian Nation that same month. In August 1993, the Islamic revolutionary courts [ordered](#) the arrest of the editor-in-chief of *Salam* newspaper, after its criticism of government policy. Mehdi Nassiri, the editor-in-chief of *Kayhan*, was similarly [detained](#) on slander charges filed against him by Iran’s then Chief Justice Mohammad Yazdi. Thus, Raisi was critical for the Islamic Republic’s efforts to consolidate power.

National Platform

Raisi concluded his tenure as chief prosecutor-general of Tehran in 1994. In [1995](#), policy changes within the Islamic Republic rendered the office of prosecutors-general defunct, instead relying on judges to act as both prosecutor and judge – an arrangement which lasted eight years. Nevertheless, Raisi was rewarded for his service, being promoted as head of the [General Inspection Office of Iran](#) (GIO), a post in which he served for ten years. This was the first position

that Raisi occupied with nationwide reach. Leading the GIO therefore offered more management experience and exposure. Article 174 of Iran’s Constitution stipulates its authority in keeping with the judiciary’s role to “supervise the proper conducting of affairs and the correct implementation of laws by the administrative organs of the government.” Raisi’s elevation to this role coincided with the tenure of then Chief Justice Mohammad Yazdi, demonstrating how Yazdi continued to promote his career.

Despite the national platform the role afforded its occupants, the position had not been a steppingstone to more powerful positions within the Islamic Republic. Raisi’s predecessor, Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad, served in the job for 13 years—from 1981-94—spanning almost the entirety of Khomeini’s Supreme Leadership and the early part of Khamenei’s tenure. But Mohaghegh Damad was not rewarded with a more powerful position in 1994. This could partly be explained by Mohaghegh Damad being trusted more by Khomeini than by Khamenei, who cut his career cut short. Thus, as Raisi entered this position, he risked the same fate as Mohaghegh Damad.

However, he quickly established himself as a key player within Iranian politics, laying the groundwork for his brand as an anti-corruption crusader—at one point saying most of the cases on his [docket](#) dealt with corruption and that he would be prepared to confront leading clerics accused of such illicit activity. Early in his tenure, he [bragged](#) to provincial judges in Hormozgan that a commission had been established at the judiciary to help inspire confidence in its operations. Raisi played a role in an [investigation](#) of corruption in institutions directly controlled by the Supreme Leader, claiming that a final report had been submitted to Khamenei himself. He also [showcased](#) efforts by the GIO to thwart profiteering from government grants and loans, and even began an investigation into the division of the [Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance](#) in charge of book censorship. Raisi also [spearheaded](#) cases of embezzlement of 100 and 120 billion rials from the Housing and Urban Development departments of Khuzestan and Qazvin provinces, respectively, and [chastised](#) state managers who flew to Kish Island, arguing the trip was too extravagant. Likewise, he exposed how private cooperatives used public assets—a method by which Iranian officials engage in corrupt activity.

Such exposure to Iran’s sprawling bureaucracy—from the judiciary to the executive branch—was valuable for Raisi, enabling him to build a brand in tackling corruption, while also nurturing key relationships. Iranian news outlets indicate Raisi won [praise](#) at one point from then reformist President Mohammad Khatami for his “accurate reports,” setting an “exemplary model for his ministers.” Raisi served as the head of GIO until 2004—during the tenures of both Chief Justices Yazdi and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi.

In 2004, he ascended to the office of first deputy chief justice. It was again indicative of the confidence that Khamenei and Chief Justice Shahroudi had in his loyalty. Raisi replaced Mohammad-Hadi Marvi, who had served as first deputy chief justice since 1999. But Raisi soon found himself facing a similar dynamic to when he first started as the head of the GIO. His predecessors at the GIO—Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad—and as first deputy chief justice—Mohammad-Hadi Marvi—had both vanished into relative obscurity after their roles as senior

judiciary officials. Thus, there was no guarantee of an automatic promotion as he began his new role. But Raisi's timing was fortuitous, as he would have direct working relationships with Chief Justice Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi and later [Sadeqh Larijani](#), who, at various points, were both viewed as potential successors to Khamenei.

Raisi quickly raised his profile as deputy chief justice—becoming associated not only with anti-corruption cases but also with pressing security and social matters of the time. In 2008, he [accused](#) the United States and the United Kingdom of supporting the Sunni militant group Jundallah “with arms and information,” claiming Iran had documents proving the assistance. Such a declaration was important as Jundallah would later sponsor a suicide bombing in Iran for the first time, killing four and wounding 12 in Saravan.

Raisi played a visible role in the crackdown on the unrest following the disputed June 2009 reelection of then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, [announcing](#) hangings of protesters. Indeed, Raisi was careful to follow Khamenei's edicts as deputy chief justice, [proclaiming](#) that because the Supreme Leader had said that questioning the validity of the 2009 presidential election was a “great crime,” “those who have proposed the elections were fraudulent and created doubt in the public's mind have undoubtedly committed a grave crime and naturally will have to answer for the crime they have committed.” He also [dubbed](#) the incident wherein inmates detained after the 2009 presidential election protests died at Kahrizak Prison a “peripheral issue,” and made a point of publicizing how the children of former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani would be tried.

In 2011, he dismissed [allegations](#) of gang rapes, claiming that in Iran, “there is more safety for women than in Western society.” As sanctions suffocated Iran's economy, Raisi [announced](#) in 2012 the indictment of 18 current and former U.S. officials for “criminal acts” against Iran. All of these announcements are indicative of Raisi's careful attention to his image—capitalizing on waste, fraud, and abuse inside Iran's government while at the same time meting out harsh punishments in security cases and grabbing headlines with high-profile indictments.

Raisi and his family were also rewarded after he became first deputy to Iran's chief justice. In 2005, Iran's Supreme Leader [named](#) his father-in-law, Ayatollah Alamolhoda, as the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad. This was a significant assignment, given Mashhad was Khamenei's place of [birth](#). Raisi himself became a [member](#) of the [Assembly of Experts](#), which is constitutionally vested with the selection and supervision of the Supreme Leader, in 2006. Soon after, in 2007, capitalizing on the platform that Khamenei had given him as a Friday prayer leader, Alamolhoda became a [member](#) of the Assembly of Experts.

In 2012, Raisi was appointed to additional positions, which further boosted his stock in Tehran. That year, he was [named](#) the prosecutor-general of the Special Court for the Clergy—a position he continues to hold. [Alumni](#) of this post included powerful figures from the regime—including three onetime intelligence ministers: Ali Fallahian, Mohammad Reyshahri, and [Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei](#).

Raisi retained the role of first deputy chief justice until 2014, after which he became attorney general of Iran, another important position within the judiciary. Once again, Raisi found himself in the same circle of clerics who had occupied positions of consequence both in the intelligence and judicial communities. In fact, both Mohammad Reyshahri and Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei were Raisi's predecessors as attorney general in addition to prosecutor-general of the Special Court for the Clergy. Despite his earlier positions, the public had never before seen him as a national prosecutor. During his tenure, Raisi generated headlines by vowing to take legal action against [Saudi Arabia](#) for a stampede during the annual hajj. He [called](#) it a crime and accused Saudi Arabia of blocking a road used by pilgrims for the use of a royal motorcade.

During his time as attorney general, Raisi also began speaking at symbolically significant events for the regime, thus boosting his visibility. For instance, in 2015, he [spoke](#) on Aban 13, which marks the anniversary of the seizure of the U.S. embassy in 1979, where marchers traveled from the University of Tehran to the site of the former U.S. embassy. In 2016, he gave a [speech](#) during the Fajr ceremonies, which mark the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Raisi was scheduled as the first speaker that year at Khomeini's mausoleum. Again, this was an important event for Raisi as he ascended the ladder of power.

The Politicization of a Religious Platform

On March 8, 2016, Iran's Supreme Leader appointed Raisi as the new head of Astan-e Quds Razavi in Mashhad. In a statement, Khamenei [referred](#) to him as a "trustworthy person with high-profile experience." Astan-e Quds Razavi is Iran's wealthiest foundation and oversees the Imam Reza Shrine, which is one of the holiest sites in Shiite Islam. According to some [estimates](#), Astan-e Quds Razavi's assets total billions of dollars. Raisi's elevation to the post was historic by any measure. He [succeeded](#) Abbas Vaez-Tabasi, who had held the position since Khomeini appointed him in 1979 until the day he died. The position provided Raisi with both a religious and financial platform from which to further promote his brand. Raisi's family was also rewarded at the same time, with the Supreme Leader [naming](#) his father-in-law Ayatollah Alamolhoda as his new representative to the province of Khorasan Razavi. That put Raisi's family in firm control of one of Iran's most important cities.

Nevertheless, Raisi found himself once again in a position where his predecessor wasn't necessarily upwardly mobile—with Vaez-Tabasi lasting in the role for decades. But Raisi soon found a way to capitalize on his new position. Only [months](#) after his appointment, Iranian media began referring to Raisi as an ayatollah rather than the lower ranking hojatoleslam. Soon after, [profiles](#) began emerging, which trumpeted Raisi as a potential successor to Khamenei himself.

Raisi started his new position at a time when [the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#) had just been inked. But he soon used his new position in Mashhad as a means to needle [then President Hassan Rouhani](#). According to a [report](#) in the *Financial Times* in January 2017, "hardliners...prevented politicians close to Mr. Rouhani from making speeches in the city in recent months and cancelled music concerts." Just over a year into his tenure, Raisi [entered](#) the 2017 presidential race. It was a bold move for Raisi—challenging an incumbent president. Since 1981,

every Iranian president had won reelection. But Rouhani was encountering a different electoral landscape from Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad. It was his administration that had concluded a high-stakes nuclear deal with the West.

In challenging Rouhani, Raisi [emphasized](#) that while he was reluctant to run for the presidency, he did so because he believed it was his “religious and revolutionary responsibility.” This Iranian political humility is similar to Khamenei’s own experience before ascending to the Supreme Leadership, pleading that he was [unqualified](#) for the post. Raisi focused heavily on economic issues in the campaign—specifically what he felt was the Rouhani administration’s failure to deliver despite the JCPOA. His official website [proclaimed](#) “The Islamic establishment is four decades’ old and while we have had achievements and progress, people are still suffering from chronic structural problems and mismanagement which are preventing the government from responding to people’s demands and fulfilling constitutional aims...Can’t we resolve issues such as recession, unemployment and obstacles in the way of businesses?... I deeply believe that this can change.” He also used his status as the head of Astan-e Quds Razavi as a credential to make himself more accessible to the lower classes in Iran. Upon registering, he [said](#), “[m]y mission in AQR [Astan-e Quds Razavi] has been to help the poor and from the day one we created a department to aid the poor.”

Beyond his contretemps against Rouhani, Raisi’s candidacy carried symbolic importance. Given the speculation surrounding him being a contender to succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader, the presidency would be a natural steppingstone for Raisi because of Khamenei having previously served as president. It was a way for him to test his brand electorally as well as deploy the vast resources and platform that Astan-e Quds Razavi provides. In fact, Raisi’s candidacy carried the perceived imprimatur of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). [Pictures circulated](#) of him in a chair, with senior commanders of the IRGC—including its then Commander-in-Chief Mohammad Ali Jafari and [then Commander of the Quds Force Qassem Soleimani](#)—seated at his knee. The picture was a sign of deference for Raisi.



Seated from Left to Right: Ebrahim Raisi, former Commander of the IRGC-Basij Forces Mohammed Reza Naqdi, former Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Mohammad Ali Jafari, and former Commander of the IRGC-Quds Force Qassem Soleimani

Raisi framed his [candidacy](#) as one “for the whole of Iran. I don’t limit myself to a certain group, party, or faction.” In doing so, he didn’t make a strong impression in the first debate against Rouhani, where he [focused](#) mostly on a populist message and ceded much of the barbs to more seasoned political figures like [then-Mayor of Tehran Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf](#). In fact, Raisi attempted to make himself more accessible to moderate voters by posting a video [lauding](#) his wife Jamileh Alamolhoda, who is a professor at Shahid Beheshti University. He claimed, “[i]f I go home and she’s not there, I don’t mind. If there is no supper, I don’t mind. I genuinely believe that her work helps her and the country...and she is having an impact.” This more pragmatic view of a wife’s role stood in contrast to the traditionalist nature of figures like Khamenei, whose wife once [remarked](#) in a rare interview that “[h]e doesn’t expect anything but a happy, calm, and healthy family environment.” Additionally, Raisi tried to appeal to younger voters, appearing alongside rapper Amir Tataloo. It was another unconventional [move](#) for Raisi as a former deputy chief justice, because Tataloo had been imprisoned in 2016 for 62 days for “encouraging corruption and prostitution among the youth.”

However, despite Raisi’s attempts to portray himself as above the fray and modern, his campaign included operatives associated with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s conservative administration, most especially his campaign manager [Ali Nikzad](#), who served in Ahmadinejad’s cabinet. In the second debate, Raisi [sparred](#) with Rouhani over the JCPOA, charging that the deal had not redounded to Tehran’s benefit and asking, “Dear people! Our question is whether the wheels of economy are turning. Businessmen: are you able to do business?” In a speech, Rouhani took direct aim at Raisi saying Iranians would not vote for “those who have only known how to execute and jail people.” That’s not to mention that Raisi received a boost from Ghalibaf, a Rouhani critic, when he withdrew and endorsed Raisi’s campaign. Ghalibaf pleaded with his supporters “to contribute their full capacity and support for the success of my brother, Ebrahim Raisi.” Raisi in turn [called](#) Ghalibaf’s withdrawal a “revolutionary act.”

Ultimately, Raisi lost the 2017 presidential election, [receiving](#) 38 percent of the vote, compared to Rouhani’s 57 percent. That didn’t prevent Raisi from [accusing](#) his opponents of voter fraud.

After his loss, Raisi continued to lead Astan-e Quds Razavi while also working to further raise his profile. It was in this period that Raisi attempted to build his relationship with Iran’s broader Axis of Resistance—namely [Hezbollah](#). In January 2018, he made an important [trip](#) to Lebanon to visit [Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah](#) and other officials. Raisi generated headlines when he was [pictured](#) touring the border between Israel and [Lebanon](#), proclaiming “Jerusalem’s liberation is near” and commenting that Hezbollah’s brand is more than military and that it encompasses “diverse tasks in building Islamic culture.” The optics of Raisi’s visit to Lebanon spoke volumes—namely of his ambition. It was a bold move after losing his bid to become president. But it demonstrated that Raisi still maintained a powerful platform at the helm of Astan-e Quds Razavi and that he still had his eyes on even higher office.

In December 2018, Iran’s Supreme Leader began making consequential personnel decisions that would affect Raisi’s career trajectory. After the death of former Chairman of Iran’s Expediency Council Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, Khamenei [elevated](#) Sadegh Larijani, then chief justice, as his successor. The Expediency Council is a body that resolves differences between parliament and the Guardian Council. Larijani was nearing the end of his term at the helm of the judiciary in August 2019, after spending close to a decade in the powerful position. But Larijani would not occupy both positions for long. In March 2019, Iran’s Supreme Leader [appointed](#) Raisi as Larijani’s successor as chief justice. Such a move raised eyebrows as it came months before Larijani’s term was scheduled to end. If that promotion wasn’t enough, [days](#) later Raisi became deputy chairman of the Assembly of Experts, [beating](#) Larijani himself.

Raisi thus positioned himself well in the battle to succeed Khamenei. He controlled one branch of government while commanding a leadership post in the body that is formally vested with the authority to select Iran’s next Supreme Leader. While Larijani was once thought to be a leading contender to become Supreme Leader, Raisi systematically tarnished his brand, launching an anti-corruption case [against](#) his former deputy Akbar Tabari. Indeed, Larijani himself [argued](#) the revelations—the trial had been broadcast on state television—were part of a “pre-planned scenario” to sully his image. Raisi also [claimed](#) credit for the firing of at least 60 judges from the Larijani era. Raisi additionally used anti-corruption as a political weapon against the Rouhani administration, with the president’s [brother](#), the [son-in-law](#) of his labor minister, the [daughter](#) of his former industry minister, and his former [vice president for women and family affairs](#) being targeted under Raisi’s watch.

At the same time, Raisi attempted to win plaudits from more pragmatic power centers in Iran—instituting stricter financial transparency measures for senior officials and ordering an [investigation](#) into “possible negligence” surrounding the death of a social media activist in prison. That’s not to mention the temporary [release](#) of prisoners amid the coronavirus outbreak, and the judiciary’s [decision](#) in July 2020 to order a retrial after outrage spread over the death sentences of three protesters detained after the unrest surrounding the new gas policy in November 2019.

The position of chief justice brought added advantages for Raisi as he assumed a position on [the Supreme National Security Council \(SNSC\)](#) as well as the Supreme Economic Coordination Council (SECC). Both positions enhanced his resume as prior to 2019, Raisi had served on neither. The SNSC gave him firsthand experience in national security policymaking and the SECC has grown into an important political body, which, at times, has circumvented Iran’s legislative chamber. He also courted members of the broader Axis of Resistance—for example, calling Ismail Haniyeh, the head of [Hamas’](#) political bureau, in April 2020 and making a high-profile trip to [Iraq](#). Raisi played a leading role in mobilizing Iran’s legal response to the strike which killed former IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 and was prominently pictured at Khamenei’s side at the late commander’s funeral.



Left to Right: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Chief Justice Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi at the funeral of former IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani

2021 Presidential Candidacy

After much speculation, Raisi decided to stand for election in the June 2021 presidential election. His [campaign slogan](#) was “popular government, strong Iran.” Unlike “moderates” or “reformists” — who traditionally have sought to retain the country’s Islamist regime but want to institute some reforms and call for reducing hostilities with the United States — the “principlist” camp has sought to retain the country’s Islamist regime and its theocratic, anti-Western ideology, abhorring compromise, or engagement with the United States. Raisi enjoyed the endorsements of various principlist factions, including the Islamic Revolution Forces Coalition Council and the Islamic Revolution Steadfastness Front.

In the 2021 election cycle, apparently to fulfill Khamenei’s [earlier](#) calls for a “young revolutionary president,” [the Guardian Council](#) disqualified all prominent reformist and pragmatic candidates, like former Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani, as well as other high profile registrants such as former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Brig. Gen. Saeed Mohammad, who until recently was the chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) engineering Khatam ol-Anbiya Construction Base. The ideologically diverse range of the disqualified shows how small the true centers of power atop have become—with Khamenei wanting to control the succession process. [Voice of America](#) and Deutsche Welles Persian have [reported](#) that on the day that Raisi registered for the presidency, IRGC Intelligence Organization and judiciary agents warned a number of reporters in Iran not to write critical content about Raisi. During the campaign, Raisi promised to promote a resistance economy while also pursuing a revival of the Iran nuclear deal.

Given the mass candidate disqualifications and distrust of the system, [voter turnout](#) in the 2021 presidential election was the lowest in the history of the Islamic Republic, at 48.8%. Raisi [trounced](#) his rivals, winning around 62% of the vote. Additionally, 12.9% of votes cast were either blank or invalid—a higher percentage than votes for the next runner-up—indicating a large number of

protest votes. The fact that a sizeable majority of voters chose to either stay home or cast protest votes, rather than coalescing behind the most pragmatic candidate, shows that Iranians are increasingly alienated and no longer see electoral politics as a viable vehicle for enacting desired social and economic reforms. These disaffected citizens will increasingly turn to alternative means, such as protests and demonstrations to pressure the regime.

President

With Raisi's election as president in 2021, he became the first chief justice to assume the presidency since the inception of the Islamic Republic. His ascension represented Iran's deep state—dominated by the Supreme Leader and his appointees—overtaking the elected state. As president, a revolving door has emerged between his new office, the judiciary, [the Office of the Supreme Leader](#), and Astan-e Quds Razavi, which Raisi previously headed. Many of his appointments and nominations—like his chief of staff and vice president for executive affairs—have either judicial or foundational experience at Astan-e Quds Razavi. This is not to mention his [First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber](#), who previously headed [the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order \(EIKO\)](#), an economic conglomerate directly controlled by the Office of Iran's Supreme Leader. This shows the degree of the Raisi administration's close ties to deep state entities.

In addition to these personnel trends, Raisi's administration took shape as the most sanctioned presidency in the history of the Islamic Republic. Raisi himself, his chief of staff, vice president for executive affairs, vice president for parliamentary affairs, vice president for economic affairs, vice president and head of the Atomic Energy Organization, and ministers of defense, interior, oil, roads, and tourism are all subject to sanctions. This is not to mention that Interpol has issued Red Notices for two members of his administration: Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi and Vice President for Economic Affairs Mohsen Rezaei, who are wanted for their roles in the bombing of the AMIA Building in Buenos Aires in 1994.

While in office, Raisi was more mobile than his predecessor, Hassan Rouhani. Rouhani, for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic, was confined to his office in Tehran. Raisi, in contrast, undertook extensive provincial travel. Raisi also showcased a diplomatic achievement at the beginning of his presidency when the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) approved Iran's accession as a member. But this was not entirely the result of Raisi's efforts, as the groundwork had been laid for years before that moment. Raisi was merely the beneficiary of this development. Iran officially joined the SCO in July 2023, a major foreign policy achievement undercutting Western efforts to pressure the regime through economic and diplomatic isolation.

Two months into his tenure, Raisi enjoyed higher approval ratings than Rouhani. An October 2021 survey by the University of Maryland revealed that [75% of Iranians](#) viewed Raisi "positively," while a similar number viewed Rouhani "negatively." President Raisi's first year in office, though, has been marked by dismal economic performance. Post-election enthusiasm for the president faded as it became clear that he and his administration have been ill-prepared and unable to confront the pressing structural economic challenges.

In short, the Raisi administration was made up of unqualified individuals. Fars Province MP Moslem Salehi [said](#) that “according to surveys, more than 50 percent of [Raisi’s] appointments lack acceptable logic and explanation... [and] executive experience.” Many of them were selected based on loyalty, friendship, or familial ties, and some of Raisi’s appointees, in turn, adopted this criterion to make appointments of their own.

For example, Raisi’s Minister of Petroleum [Javad Oji](#)—[designated](#) by the U.S. Treasury Department under the Trump administration in November 2020 for being a senior executive officer of a key oil exporting holding company controlled by the IRGC—was [exposed in a leaked audiotape](#) ordering his ministry’s human resource department to hire the daughter of a parliamentary deputy close to Raisi. His minister of labor [appointed](#) his own wife’s brother as an advisor. And there are countless other [known cases](#) of nepotism.

The administration also rewarded several former members of the IRGC—a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. There are at least [five former IRGC members](#) in the cabinet: [the Minister of Intelligence Seyed Esmail Khatib](#), Minister of Roads and Urban Development Rostam Qassemi, [Minister of Interior Ahmad Vahidi](#), Minister of Tourism and Cultural Heritage Ezzatollah Zarghami, and Vice President for Economic Affairs Mohsen Rezaei. Additionally, [Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian reportedly](#) has close ties to the IRGC, with stints as a foreign service officer in Iraq. In some cases, such as that of Mohsen Rezaei, stature within the IRGC [trumped](#) lack of qualification. Given the prevalence of former IRGC members, the current administration is poised to increase the potency of the IRGC, and the IRGC will in turn offer crucial support.

These key figures with an IRGC background have been [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. government. In 2019, Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) Qassemi—a former Minister of Petroleum, and former senior IRGC Quds Force official—for overseeing a vast oil smuggling network. Raisi’s Interior Minister, who is responsible for repressing domestic protests, was [sanctioned](#) back in 2010, when he was Minister of Defense in then President Ahmadinejad’s administration. As noted, he is also the subject of an INTERPOL Red Notice for his involvement in the bombing of the AMIA building in Argentina when he was commander of the IRGC’s Quds Force. Minister of Intelligence Seyed Esmail Khatib was designated in 2022, first on [September 9](#) under Executive Order (E.O.) 13694, which targets individuals engaging in malicious cyber activities; then on [September 22](#) under E.O. 13553, which targets human rights offenders.

IRGC operations against the U.S.—both on U.S. soil and in Iraq and Syria, where U.S. troops are based—increased in frequency after Raisi took office. On August 10, 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice charged an Iranian national and member of the IRGC for plotting to assassinate former U.S. National Security Advisor and UANI board member John Bolton on behalf of the Quds Force. The operative in charge of the plot [allegedly](#) told his recruit that the order to carry out the assassination was sent down through a chain of command.

Other former U.S. government officials, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, former Defense Secretary Mark Esper, and former Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook, as well as

the think-tank community, are also targets. Our organization, United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), remains [at the center of Iran's campaign](#) against think-tanks. Meanwhile, proxy attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and [Syria](#) have [drastically increased](#) recently. They could increase further as Iran [plots](#) to facilitate IED attacks against U.S. convoys in Syria. And Iran has sought to conduct terrorist operations against Israeli interests in [Turkey](#), [Cyprus](#), and [Azerbaijan](#). All of this has occurred under Raisi's watch, who, though not the chief decision-maker in Iran, chairs the SNSC as president.

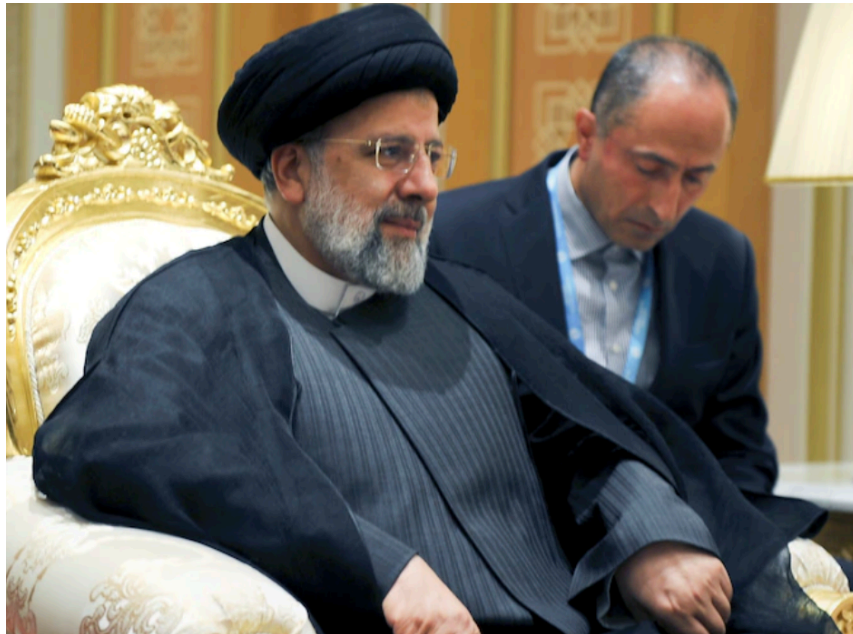
Foreign Policy

After President Raisi took office, Iran sought to boost [ties with Russia and China](#), improve economic and political relations with its Middle East neighbors, and promote cooperation with Central Asian nations, such as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. This contrasts with his predecessor, who was focused on striking a nuclear deal with the P5+1 and building ties with the West. Raisi has already met with President Putin of Russia [on three separate occasions](#): once in Russia before the invasion of Ukraine; once at a summit in Turkmenistan; and then during a visit to Tehran.

The first meeting occurred in January 2022, as tensions between the U.S. and Russia escalated in the run-up to the war in Ukraine. President Raisi was given the honor of addressing Russia's lower house of parliament, and he took the opportunity of his state visit to [voice tacit support](#) for a war in Ukraine, saying it was time to confront "the power of the Americans with an increased synergy between our two countries." At this meeting, the two presidents agreed to a "framework" for increased economic and military cooperation, modeled on the [\\$400 billion investment deal](#) signed between Iran and China during the Rouhani administration. The [proposed 20-year plan](#) between Iran and Russia would see technology transfer from Russia to Iran, Iranian purchases of Russian military equipment, and Russian investment in Iran's energy sector and infrastructure.

On February 25, 2022, the day after Russia invaded Ukraine, Raisi called Putin on the phone to express his opposition to NATO, but still fell short of officially fully endorsing the war. "The continued expansion of NATO is a serious threat against the stability and security of independent countries in various regions of the world," he [reportedly told](#) Vladimir Putin on the call.

Then, as Western sanctions against Russia ratcheted up, Iran and Russia's leaders met in Turkmenistan. The two countries may have invited and would welcome Turkmenistan's participation in a sanctions-evasion scheme, hoping the Central Asian country is willing to flout the Western sanctions regime. Raisi met with Putin on the summit's sidelines and [proposed](#) that the financial exchanges between Iran and Russia should be expanded independently of the Western financial exchange system. The two isolated countries—both heavily sanctioned—are deepening their long-fraught relationship on the basis of mutual opposition to the U.S.



President Raisi listens to President Putin at the Turkmenistan summit on June 29, 2022

When Putin visited Iran in July 2022, he received a declaration of support for his war in Ukraine from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Supreme Leader [explicitly stated](#) that the war is justified, because if “[Russia] had not taken the helm, the other side would have done so and initiated a war.” This statement went further than President Raisi had in the past—and further than China’s [cautious neutrality](#). Moreover, the “framework” to which the two countries’ leaders agreed back in January was formalized with respect to the energy sector, as Russia’s state-owned oil and gas giant [Gazprom](#) and Iran’s state-owned National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) signed a [\\$40 billion deal](#) focusing on the development of oil and gas fields in Iran. The military dimension of the proposal also began to take shape around this time, but rather than Iran purchasing military equipment from Russia as originally planned, Russia was going [to purchase drones](#) and receive training in how to use them from Iran for use in Ukraine.

Since then, Iran has sought to purchase advanced [Russian Su-35 fighter jets](#) and receive Russian [support for its nuclear program](#). Iran has also [allegedly supplied](#) Russia with artillery, tank shells, and rockets worth nearly \$1 million. Additionally, under Raisi Iran has [provided](#) Russia with extensive drone technology, bolstering its warfighting capability. U.S. intelligence also indicates that Iran could provide Russia with ballistic missiles to replenish its stockpile, a prospect that will become more likely after the expiration of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231’s missile restrictions in [October 2023](#).

Turkey’s President Erdogan also attended the July 2022 trilateral summit in Tehran. The NATO member-state has thus far remained neutral on the war in Ukraine, proposing to facilitate dialogue between the West and Russia. However, Turkey had its motivations behind ostensibly acting as a mediator. Erdogan threatened to use Turkey’s veto power within NATO to “freeze” Finland and Sweden’s accession to the military alliance [to extract concessions](#) from Washington on the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey.

On his trip to Tehran, Erdogan [pledged](#) to increase gas and oil imports from Iran and referred to Putin as his “dear friend.” His main objective in attending the summit was not to promote Russia or Iran’s diplomatic engagement with the West but to seek the approval of Moscow and Tehran for an incursion into northern Syria. Khamenei and Putin [opposed](#) a Turkish incursion. Iran’s Supreme Leader [warned](#) Erdogan against military operations in Syria—where his country and Russia have [invested significant resources](#) to prop up the brutal Assad regime.

Strengthening ties with China has also formed another critical piece of Iran’s foreign policy. Iran, Russia, and China share an anti-Western outlook against the U.S. and its allies. In January 2022, these three countries [held joint naval exercises](#) in the northern Indian Ocean. But China is more crucial to the survival of the Iranian regime than Russia, given its superior military, economic, and political clout on the global stage.

Iran’s sale of oil to China has provided a vital source of revenue to its depleted government coffers. UANI [calculated](#) that during President Biden’s first year in office, Iran exported more oil to China than before the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign—at a clip of 939,000 barrels per day. Iran’s economy minister reported a [580% increase](#) in income on oil and gas condensate sales between March 2022 and July 2022, compared to last year. This revenue keeps the Iranian regime liquid, relieving pressure from Western sanctions and diminishing incentives to negotiate a nuclear deal on reasonable terms. Without this revenue, Iran’s government would be hard-pressed to fund its terrorist proxies, global terror operations, and [nuclear](#) and [ballistic missile programs](#)—each a threat to U.S. national security.

Closer to home, Iran is attempting to improve economic and political relations with its Middle East neighbors, as relations between Arab states and Israel show potential based on the Trump administration’s Abraham Accords. Seeing that closer ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel would further isolate Iran, the Raisi administration extended an olive branch to Saudi Arabia, and in March 2023, China [brokered](#) a normalization of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, further undercutting Western efforts to isolate the regime. The two countries were engaged in Iraq-mediated talks prior to the Chinese intervention, with [reportedly](#) more enthusiasm on Iran’s side than on Saudi Arabia’s. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed in 2016 after the Saudis executed a prominent Shia cleric, Nimr Baker al-Nimr. And they remain fraught, as the Saudis executed [41 Shia Muslims](#) in March 2022, and Iran continues to support [Houthi](#) rebels in Yemen in their war against Saudi Arabia.

Iran’s diplomatic outreach extends to other Gulf Arab states as well. In February 2022, President Raisi met with Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani in Qatar—the first visit to Qatar by an Iranian president in eleven years. The high-level talks yielded [several agreements](#), including plans to cooperate on constructing an underwater tunnel between Iran and Qatar. However, the implementation of these agreements may be contingent upon the revival of a nuclear deal between Iran and the U.S., partly because Qatar is a U.S. ally. Qatar, according to [some reports](#), might be mediating between the U.S. and Iran in the nuclear negotiations, hoping to leverage its

relations with both countries to broaden its influence in the region. More recently, Oman has played the intermediary role, [conveying messages](#) between Iranian and U.S. diplomats in Oman.

Furthermore, the U.A.E.'s senior national security advisor [invited](#) President Raisi to his country during a meeting with Raisi in December 2021. A month later, the Houthi rebels [launched](#) drone and missile attacks on Abu Dhabi, the capital of the U.A.E. Nonetheless, a Qatari newspaper [reported](#) in May 2022 that Raisi would travel to the U.A.E.. Iran's Foreign Ministry said that the Iranian president would be visiting a Gulf Arab state, and the U.A.E. dispatched an ambassador to Iran in August 2022 for the first time since 2016. This was meant to keep open a channel of communication for de-escalation. However, relations between the two countries remain tense, given that the U.A.E. is part of the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, and is threatened by Iran's pursuit of regional dominance.

Raisi also attempted to build bridges with other regional neighbors, such as [Pakistan](#) and [India](#), conducting state visits and signing new commercial agreements toward the end of his presidency in the spring of 2024. However, the scope of these efforts has been limited by U.S. [sanctions](#), the ramifications of [cross-border military operations](#), and the [failure](#) of earlier arrangements. Ultimately, the long-term impact of these efforts remains to be seen, and if they will remain in place following his untimely death.

Overall, Iran's hegemonic ambitions overshadowed the Raisi administration's diplomatic overtures. On one hand, Raisi has signaled Iran's interest in regional partnerships. On the other, he is a proponent of Iran's military expansionism and proxy warfare. Iran's military and proxy campaigns are most visible in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the [Palestinian territories](#). By leading an "Axis of Resistance"—an informal alliance between Iran, Syria, and Iran-backed proxies, such as [Kataib Hezbollah](#) and [Asaib Ahl al-Haq](#) in Iraq, and [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon—Iran has sought to destabilize the region and confront Israel. Iran has [built military bases](#) in Syria to support a weapons storage and transport networks, training programs, and housing for Iranian troops. It has [exported weapons production capabilities](#) to Syria. And its proxies, along with IRGC commanders and Syrian regime forces, [control strategic locations](#) in Syria, including the area west of the Euphrates River in the Deir Ezzor province. This border area allows Iran to continue funneling money, arms, and personnel into Syria and its terrorist proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon.

During Assad's May 2022 visit to Tehran, the Supreme Leader [blasted](#) the Abraham Accords—the pact with Israel signed by the U.A.E. and other Arab countries—and signaled Iran's intention to retain Syria's allegiance to the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance." The choreography of the meeting between the Supreme Leader and Assad, which included President Raisi and his foreign minister, [Hossein Amir-Abdollahian](#), suggested Raisi is closer to the Axis of Resistance than his predecessor. By contrast, when Assad traveled to Iran in 2019, neither former President Rouhani, nor his foreign minister, Javad Zarif, attended the meeting between Assad and the Supreme Leader. [Qassem Soleimani](#) featured prominently in the footage from 2019, unlike [Esmail Ghaani](#) in 2022.

Iran's hegemonic ambitions are also manifest in its pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability, which remains an imminent threat to all actors in the region and the U.S. Despite [pledges to support](#)

[diplomacy](#) to revive the 2015 nuclear deal—from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2018—Khamenei and Raisi are more intent upon pressuring the U.S. and stalling for time. Having [appointed an outspoken opponent](#) of the nuclear deal, Ali Bagheri Kani, to lead Iran’s negotiating team, Raisi revealed his intention to drive a hardline with the Americans. Indeed, Iranian negotiators are not even willing to meet directly with their American counterparts. Tehran [shut down](#) IAEA cameras monitoring Iranian nuclear facilities, unveiled plans [to move](#) new enrichment facilities further underground to protect against aerial strikes, and continues to [accelerate the enrichment of uranium](#) to near-weapons grade. In Vienna, the Iranian negotiators walked back arrangements made in former rounds of talks and turned to excessive demands—many of which go beyond the scope of the original deal.

Meanwhile, Raisi took a hands-off approach to the nuclear situation at home. Whereas former President Rouhani met with the IAEA’s director-general when he traveled to Tehran, President Raisi did not; his first vice president and foreign minister [handled](#) this contact. Likewise, whereas Rouhani [met with](#) the former European Union (E.U.)’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on his travel to Tehran, the current one did not meet with Raisi on his trip; the highest-ranking Iranian official he [met with](#) was then [Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council \(SNSC\) Ali Shamkhani](#).

Despite resuming negotiations with the P5+1 over the nuclear deal, Tehran signaled that rejoining the nuclear deal would not define the Raisi presidency, in contrast to effort expended by Rouhani and his foreign minister. This has been evident in the delay in the nuclear negotiations following Raisi’s election victory—a tactic that has also been geared towards increasing Tehran’s leverage at the negotiating table. While deprioritizing the nuclear deal, Raisi’s focus remained on increasing economic partnerships in the region, and deepening ties with China and Russia, in part to neutralize Western sanctions.

President Raisi’s foreign policy priority was to bolster ties with Russia and China, who are becoming increasingly willing partners and more of a security threat to the U.S. Integration with the West has taken a lower priority than the Rouhani administration. The Supreme Leader’s strategic vision, which entails a rejection of Western values and influence in the world, has taken precedence, along with the export of Iran’s revolutionary ideals and its theocratic form of government and the pursuit of a nuclear weapon—each in the service of its hegemonic aspirations. Moreover, the Iranian system has [opposed any limits](#) on Iran’s ballistic missile program, or its support for terrorist proxy groups, dashing Western hopes for a longer, stronger, and broader deal.

Beyond Russia and China, Raisi sought to build partnerships with Venezuela. He made a state visit to Venezuela in June 2023, during which he sought to improve bilateral trade relations to boost sanctions evasion. The two leaders expressed optimism that their countries could increase annual trade to [\\$20 billion](#). To that end, Raisi called for activating new shipping lines between the two countries. Raisi also visited Cuba and Nicaragua, where his anti-Americanism was welcomed. However, these visits [did not yield](#) many tangible results. Cuba and Nicaragua have less to offer Tehran than, for example, Brazil. The President of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva , better known as

“Lula,” might have calculated that an invitation to Raisi was too risky, especially after allowing Iranian warships to dock at Brazilian ports in [February 2023](#).

Under Raisi’s watch, Iran also renewed its focus on relations with African countries. His trip to Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe in July 2023 marked an Iranian president's first trip to the African continent in 11 years. Raisi was greeted with a warm welcome in Kenya, where he received an honor guard, even though in [2012](#), [2015](#), and [2021](#), Kenyan authorities thwarted Iran-linked terrorist attacks targeting Western interests in Kenya. While in Uganda, Raisi launched into an anti-LGBTQ diatribe, [saying](#), “The West today is trying to promote the idea of homosexuality and by promoting homosexuality they are trying to end the generation of human beings.” Such comments were in accordance with Uganda’s repressive laws targeting the LGBTQ community.

Raisi also had a [role](#) in Iran’s [support](#) for Hamas and other proxies in Gaza, which enabled the attack against Israel on October 7, 2023 – claiming that it would bring the country’s “eventual downfall.” His administration has sought to expand the scope of the war, by facilitating deadly attacks against Israel by [Hezbollah](#), [deadly attacks](#) against U.S. forces by proxies in Iraq, and the ongoing campaign of [maritime terrorism](#) by Yemen’s Houthi rebels. Raisi has also demonstrated that Iran is increasingly willing to take direct action against Israel, launching an unprecedented missile and drone [attack](#) on April 19, 2023. Without adequate deterrence, it is likely that such activities will only escalate further.

Domestic Policy

Ultimately, President Raisi’s influence direction of Iran’s foreign policy was limited, as he was often overshadowed by Khamenei and the IRGC. However, he has extensive control over domestic policy—the main goal of which is to ensure the preservation of the oppressive clerical regime. Raisi’s populist campaign made several optimistic promises in the run-up to the election—all of which he has not delivered on thus far. For example, he claimed he would create [one million jobs](#), slow down inflation, and achieve [8% GDP growth](#). Yet, according to a report by Iran’s Ministry of Labor published almost one year into his presidency, approximately [60% of Iranians](#) do not have enough income and suitable jobs. Inflation hit record highs, with Iranians paying almost [50% more](#) for the same products compared to the spring of 2021. And the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects a GDP growth rate of [3% in 2022](#), and even lower in 2023.

Raisi also insisted that his administration would weed out corruption, which is [endemic](#) in the Iranian system. As a former chief justice, he has long nurtured the idea that he would expose and punish corrupt dealings in the government. He [once said](#) that he would “not only cut off the fingers, but chop off the arms of the corrupt.” Yet, as noted above, corruption is rife inside his administration. His Agricultural Ministry [stands accused](#) of paying a private company to import wheat and barley, though the company never did.

President Raisi surrounded himself with “[Islamic economists](#)”—thoroughly opposed to liberal democracy and market economy—to advise him on how to institutionalize Khamenei’s vision of a

“resistance economy.” Raisi [supports state-led economic development](#), with purported charities, foundations, and the IRGC at the top of domestic priorities. The state-led model, however, breeds corruption and ensures the regime’s control over the distribution of resources. Rich and prominent bonyads—such as Astan-e Quds Razavi, which Raisi previously headed—as well as the IRGC, [monopolize key industries](#) in Iran’s economy, including pharmaceutical, transportation, construction, and energy, and serve to enrich a network of regime loyalists. Regime insiders are appointed to lucrative positions within bonyads or political office, while the average Iranian struggles to cope with a devastated economy.

Given Raisi’s record on the economy and corruption, criticism against him and his administration was mounting prior to his death. An Iranian economist [charged](#) that the economy was “hostage to domestic and particularly foreign policy,” citing the heavy cost of confrontation with the U.S. Some politicians have voiced concerns that Raisi is incompetent—one once saying that his “[six literacy classes](#)” did not qualify him to manage the economy.

Some figures within his own conservative camp have also begun to take a critical view, including Speaker of the Parliament Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf, who [blamed](#) the Raisi administration for failing to contingency plan as wheat prices rose—a failure that set off protests across the country. A former staunch supporter of Raisi in parliament [called for a shake-up](#) of Raisi’s economic team. Even a renowned Qom Seminary cleric [refused](#) to meet with Raisi when he traveled to Qom in July, noting his discontent with the manipulation of the election, which saw his ally and former Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani disqualified by the Guardian Council.

While a lack of competency has been the focus of many MPs’ criticism of the administration, corruption has featured prominently in the minds of the Iranian people—particularly since the collapse of the Metropal building in May 2022. [50% of Iranian people](#) ascribed the country’s economic woes to [corruption and mismanagement](#) in October 2021. The country was thus primed for wide-scale protests.

Protests broke out as a result of the Raisi administration’s [decision to cut food subsidies](#) amid the skyrocketing price of basic foods; and further cuts are possible, as the government budget deficit is projected to rise to [\\$21 billion](#). The cuts in food subsidies—on which millions of Iranian people depend—caused prices for some flour-based staples [to increase](#) by an additional 300%. The regime responded to the protests with force, [killing several people](#), and arresting countless others, in a fashion reminiscent of the 2019-2020 protests in which the regime killed up to [1,500 people](#). It shut down the internet, and the media provided no coverage of the situation.

Then, the Metropal building collapsed, exacerbating the government’s problems. Thousands of people across the country demonstrated when it became clear that well-connected individuals [bypassed](#) industry regulations when constructing the building. Although the building was built long before Raisi came to office, its collapse, along with an inept response, symbolized deeper rot within the Iranian system. Instead of sending supplies to the site—the IRGC [reportedly](#) failed to provide the necessary cargo planes—the government sent riot police and security forces. The calls

for change were directed at the very top of the Iranian system, with some protestors chanting “death to Khamenei” and other anti-regime slogans.



President Raisi speaks at a press conference after his election victory

The regime’s repressive domestic policies, implemented by the Raisi administration, also targeted Iran’s university system. Firings and expulsions of students and teachers alike are commonplace, as the government attempts to silence critics, and bring them in line with a severe interpretation of Islam that is deemed supportive of the ruling establishment. One analyst [referred](#) to this campaign as Iran’s “third cultural revolution,” noting the detrimental consequences on the quality of education within Iran’s universities.

One of Raisi’s first decisions upon becoming president was [to withdraw](#) a bill, sponsored by his predecessor in 2019, which dictated that students should be accepted to schools based on merit rather than religious affiliation. Raisi restarted an effort that began under the first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, and that continued under the conservative former President Ahmadinejad, to “Islamize” Iranian universities. To that end, President Raisi [installed](#) a reactionary figure as the new minister of science, research, and technology; the minister, in turn, promised to implement the vision as set forth in the 2013 Document of Islamic University. This administration’s interpretation of Islam has also led to infringement on the rights of women in that hijab restrictions are [more strictly enforced](#) and severely punished.

Despite large oil revenues, the Raisi administration’s domestic policy has failed to improve the lives of ordinary citizens over the course of its first year in power—and has likely served, instead, to further enrich regime loyalists via a patronage network that reaches throughout all major sectors of Iran’s economy. There are signs of corruption, mismanagement, and incompetence, as the core drivers of poor economic performance. The regime is less capable of buying people’s acquiescence, as demonstrated by the cuts in food subsidies, and as a consequence, many have

taken to the streets in protest against the Supreme Leader and his cronies. The regime's security forces, at the direction of the U.S.-designated interior minister, have been deployed against these protesters.

While some hardline Raisi supporters defended the administration, pointing to deceiving growth reports that are based on the official, capped exchange rate, rather than the unofficial rate, and claiming that Raisi has restored the Iranian people's trust in government, others are protected their own political fortunes in distancing themselves from the president and deflecting blame onto him and his administration. Even an IRGC-affiliated news outlet [accused](#) the current oil minister of resource mismanagement. This infighting within the hardline camp will undermine Raisi's base of support.

The Labor Minister [resigned](#) amid impeachment proceedings that parliament initiated after he appointed an official [accused of having links](#) to the death of detained prisoners. Several MPs followed up by blaming him for the poor economy. Still, other members of President Raisi's economic team [may be](#) under threat of impeachment. But Raisi's top priority seems not to be the economy, corruption, or even his political base, but rather the blessing of the Supreme Leader, as he pursues succession as the next Supreme Leader. The support of elements within the security establishment, including the IRGC, may turn out to be more important to achieving this goal than fighting corruption, but a prolonged economic crisis will harm Raisi's ability to sustain a patronage network.

Recent developments in the security establishment suggest that Raisi's Minister of Intelligence, [Esmail Khatib](#), came out on top in a competition with the IRGC's Intelligence Organization. Khatib reportedly successfully [pushed](#) for [the ouster](#) of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization leader Hossein Taeb in the context of several damning intelligence failures, including [a botched assassination plot](#) against Israelis in Turkey. The Mossad [apprehended](#) a senior IRGC official and interrogated him inside Iran. An IRGC operative in charge of planning terrorist operations against Israelis abroad [was assassinated](#). And several individuals linked to Iran's nuclear and missile-development programs recently [succumbed](#) to mysterious deaths.

Raisi's presidency was highly loyal to the Supreme Leader, with the administration eager to implement his strategic vision and repressive policies at home. Raisi concurred with the Supreme Leader's belief in a severe interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, the necessity of political repression, the efficacy of proxy war and terrorist operations, and the strategic benefit of acquiring a nuclear weapon. One political analyst argues Raisi was an "[enforcer](#)" for the clerical establishment, and the face of Khamenei's foreign policy abroad. With no prior foreign policy experience, demonstrated his loyalty to the Supreme Leader in ruthlessly prosecuting political opposition throughout his long career in the judiciary.

From the beginning of protests which struck Iran in September 2022 after the Morality Police's murder of a 22-year-old girl for not properly wearing hijab, Raisi has [hewed](#) to a conspiratorial hardline, blaming Western powers for fomenting the unrest and vowing to crack down hard on protesters. As the Woman, Life, Freedom movement picked up pace across Iran, Raisi turned to

an appeasement approach as well. He [reportedly acknowledged](#) that the Islamic Republic has “shortcomings,” saying that his administration was working “to reduce people’s problems.” At the same time, he remained adamant that the regime’s enemies plotted the protests. Under Raisi’s direction, the regime continued to [execute](#) protestors arrested as part of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement.

As the protests grew, Raisi’s wife, Jamileh Alamolhoda, [emerged](#) towing the regime line that women should remain subjugated under Islamic law and that the media and the U.S. engineered the protest movement. In January 2023, she showed herself as a staunch anti-women’s rights advocate and defender of the establishment at a conference entitled “Congress of Influential Woman,” which she organized to convene the wives of heads of government around the world. Then, in June 2023, accompanying Raisi on a state visit to Venezuela, she boosted her public profile even further, [describing](#) women’s equality to men as a form of violence.

However, Alamolhoda has also [emerged](#) as a power broker for her husband, according to Amwaj Media. She reportedly operated behind the scenes in support of Raisi, particularly during Raisi’s 2017 campaign against the incumbent, President Rouhani. A report she authored on the [Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution](#) criticized Rouhani’s adoption of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, arguing that it would subvert traditional family structures and promote homosexuality. The Supreme Leader, who received the report, publicly [rebuked](#) the Rouhani administration’s decision, effectively backing Raisi. After Raisi was elected in 2021, largely owing to Khamenei’s backing and the Guardian Council’s elimination of viable opponents, her pursuit of political influence did not end; she reportedly played a role in the cabinet selection process. This was one bridge too far for Khamenei, who wrote a letter to Raisi demanding that he not allow his wife to interfere in the government’s operations, but some [sources](#) say that she retains influence over Raisi’s decisions.

Raisi’s elevation and the pains taken to clear his path have fueled speculation that the presidency is intended as a steppingstone to his eventual succession as Supreme Leader. While President Raisi will be in a constitutional position to play a leading role during an eventual leadership transition—even acting as a member of a potential interim leadership council—many questions remain, as the presidency has traditionally assumed all the accountability within the Iranian system. How Raisi fares—and whether he emerges unscathed—will be an important indicator of his stock as a potential successor to Khamenei. At the moment, he is the most qualified member of the clerical establishment to become the next Supreme Leader, having presided over two branches of the Iranian state—the judiciary and the presidency. But given his political difficulties, challenges remain for Raisi’s aspirations for higher office.

Untimely Death

On May 19, 2024, Raisi’s helicopter [crashed](#) while travelling from Azerbaijan, in northwestern Iran. Described at first as a “hard landing,” the Iranian government admitted that the president is did not [survive](#), along with other members of his cabinet. Though the cause of this crash remains

unknown, Raisi's untimely death ended speculation that he could succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader and prompted new presidential elections, casting Iranian politics into new uncertainty as regional tensions continue to mount.

Conclusion

Ebrahim Raisi's career was advanced by steady promotion by Iran's Supreme Leader, an influential family base of power, and a shrewd ability to maximize his visibility and image. Raisi developed a political brand focused on anti-corruption and populism, while bolstering the power of hardliners and principlist factions. Though thought to be a contender for the next Supreme Leader, his untimely death eliminated this possibility.

Nevertheless, this course of events may not have taken place. Though some elements of the Iranian system are positioning Raisi as Khamenei's successor, winning the presidency could have been a Pyrrhic victory. Dissatisfaction with the regime is at an all-time high due to continued economic stagnation, increased repression of protests, and the government's lack of transparency and inept handling of the coronavirus pandemic, all of which Raisi presided over.

Many Iranians boycotted his election and, as a result, have lost faith in Iran's limited electoral politics. He has inherited massive economic problems compounded by decades of structural issues and mismanagement, which he will pass on to his successors. The president remains constitutionally disempowered to meaningfully alter the course of Iran's public policy trajectory, but still has more discretion in economic policy and thus receives more blame. The Islamic Republic's core foreign policy trajectory, which is ultimately decided by the Supreme Leader, will likely continue – regardless of who succeeds him.