



WILL IRANIAN POLICY TOWARDS IRAQ CHANGE AFTER THE PASSING OF RAISI AND ABDOLLAHIAN?

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INTRODUCTION

Iran lost its President Ebrahim Raisi and its Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on May 20, 2024, due to the crash of the helicopter that was carrying them along with other officials. This was considered a significant loss for Iran, given Raisi and Abdollahian influential positions in the Iranian chain of command below

the Supreme Leader and the importance of these two men in future political calculations in Iran, especially the selection of a successor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. According to the standards of the deep state in Iran, the late President Raisi was one of the candidates to succeed the Supreme Leader, and the late Foreign Minister Abdollahian was qualified for the pres-

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idency if Raisi were to become the Supreme Leader.

Since the day of the incident, discussions have been ongoing regarding its repercussions and potential impacts on the Iranian scene. This incident will certainly leave a deep mark on Iran's domestic politics. However, concerning its impact on Iranian foreign policy, it is believed that no significant change or impact will occur as long as the supreme authority for making crucial political and security decisions in Iran rests with the "Supreme Leader." The presidency and the foreign ministry serve as high executive institutions rather than supreme executive authorities.

However, some believe this incident will also affect Iranian foreign policy. Many of Iran's foreign policies result from the interactions between the internal political-security environment and the regional and international political-security environments. Additionally, Raisi and Abdollahian could harness Iranian foreign policy to serve the Supreme Leader's directives. They possessed qualifications that aligned closely with the political-security approach of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It might be difficult for the Iranian political system to

replicate their experience in the future with other officials.

After 2003, Iraqi affairs became one of the most important issues in Iranian foreign policy. The political, security, and social transformations in Iraq following the US invasion and occupation provided Iran with strategic opportunities to enhance its roles and interests in this country and throughout the region. This was particularly the case after the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut-Mediterranean route became passable without significant obstacles.

Within the framework of various opinions on the repercussions of the Iranian presidential helicopter crash incident: what are the impacts of Raisi and Abdollahian's decrease on Iran's policy towards Iraq? Will their absence affect the nature of Iranian roles in Iraq? or will it affect the nature of the policies adopted to implement those roles, with the roles themselves remaining unchanged?

RAISI, ABDOLLAHIAN, AND THE IRAQI ISSUE

President Raisi assumed the presidency of Iran in June 2021, following a career in the judiciary, culminating in his appointment by Supreme Leader



Iranian citizens attend the funeral ceremony in memory of late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and other senior officials killed in a helicopter crash, at Mosalla Square in Tabriz, Iran on May 21.

Khamenei in 2019 as the head of the country's judiciary. Politically, Raisi cannot be categorised as belonging to any of the competing wings in Iran, whether conservative or reformist. Similarly, he cannot be associated with any of the competing wings within the conservative camp in Iran, either traditional conservatives or new conservatives. Raisi belongs to the political-ideological system that revolves around absolute faith in the principles and values of the "Islamic Revolution in Iran," complete loyalty to the Supreme Leader, and obedience to his orders and directives. Therefore, Raisi had a very good relationship with the leaders of the IRGC, as they both belong to the same ideological system. Raisi was considered the IRGC's candidate for the presidency in the 2017 elections when he ran but did not

win, and also when he won the position in the 2021 elections.

The situation in Iraq holds significant importance in Iran's agenda, equal to other top-priority issues such as the Iranian nuclear programme and the confrontation between Iran and the United States and the West. Iraq has become one of the battlegrounds between Iran and the United States. Consequently, the Iraqi file in Iranian policy is primarily associated with the office of the Supreme Leader. At times, there is competition between Iranian institutions concerned with gaining the Supreme Leader's mandate to lead this file. These competitions may involve entities like the IRGC competing with the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) or with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Raisi's charisma and his well-known loyalty to the "Islamic Revolution" system, coupled with his proximity to the Supreme Leader, added further determination to Iran's efforts to maintain its influence and gains in Iraq after Soleimani's death.

However, all such competitions are ultimately under the control of the Supreme Leader. In the end, General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force within the IRGC (who was killed in a U.S. drone strike near Baghdad airport in January 2020), emerged victorious in all of these competitions. He became the primary figure responsible for the Supreme Leader's most significant part of the Iraqi file.

Before assuming the presidency of the judiciary, Raisi's name was not associated with any significant issue concerning Iraqi affairs. However, we can imagine that he was in alignment with all previous Iranian policies towards Iraq because those policies were implemented according to the directives of the Supreme Leader and his orders. During a meeting of the Supreme Judicial Council in Iran on October 7, 2019, Raisi described the popular protests that erupted in Iraq at that time as a "foreign conspiracy."

Raisi's first direct public engagement with Iraqi affairs occurred in February 2021, when he visited Iraq in his capacity as the head of the Iranian judiciary. During this visit, Raisi met with senior Iraqi officials, including former Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and

former President Barham Salih, as well as other officials from various political factions. During the visit, Raisi urged the Iraqi authorities to form a legal, international, and local dossier to prosecute the Americans responsible for the killing of Soleimani on Iraqi soil. He also urged them to expedite the end of the US military presence in Iraq.

When Raisi became president of Iran, it was one of the factors that helped Ismail Qarani, Soleimani's successor, control the actions of Iraqi armed factions supported by Iran in line with Iranian policies and positions. Raisi's charisma and his well-known loyalty to the "Islamic Revolution" system, coupled with his proximity to the Supreme Leader, added further determination to Iran's efforts to maintain its influence and gains in Iraq after Soleimani's death.

This is the essence of the impact of Raisi's decease on Iranian policies towards Iraq: the absence of top-ranking individuals from Ayatollah Khamenei's inner circle who hold significant positions in the Iranian political scene may lead to a decline in the influence of Iranian leadership on power centres and decision-making in Iraq. Essentially, Soleimani's killing created a

significant vacuum, forcing the Iranian presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the IRGC in Iran during Raisi's tenure to work together, and with great effort, to compensate for Soleimani's absence from the Iraqi arena.

During Raisi's visit to Iraq as the head of the judiciary in February 2021, he visited the city of Najaf and requested a meeting with the highest Shiite religious authority (Marja'), Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. However, al-Sistani declined to meet him. What is notable here is that al-Sistani only receives Iranian officials who do not belong to the "hardline" political-ideological trend of Supreme Leader Khamenei. Al-Sistani had previously met with former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in March 2009, when Rafsanjani held the position of Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council of the System in Iran. He also received former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in July 2015 and former "reformist" Iranian President Hassan Rouhani accompanied by Zarif in March 2019.

On the other hand, al-Sistani refused to meet with former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in July 2013, despite Ahmadinejad's visit to Najaf at that time. In July 2017, al-Sistani also refused to meet with Mahmoud Al-Hashemi Al-Shahrudi, the head of the Iranian Expediency Discernment Council at the time, who was sent by Supreme Leader Khamenei to visit Iraq and meet with its officials, following escalating disputes among the Iraqi Shiite political factions supported by Tehran at that time.

In the same context, al-Sistani also refuses to meet with Arab Shia leaders affiliated with the "hardline" trend associated with Khamenei. In 2004, when al-Sistani passed

through Lebanon on his way to London for medical treatment, he declined to be received by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah at Beirut airport. Similarly, al-Sistani also refused to meet with a delegation of Houthi leaders who visited Iraq in September 2016. While al-Sistani received the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament and the leader of the Shia Amal Movement, Nabih Berri, in April 2019.

This phenomenon leads us to another conclusion regarding the impact of Raisi's departure on Iranian policy towards Iraq. If Raisi had succeeded Khamenei, he would have played a crucial role in strengthening Iran's position in the "hidden" competition for sacred status in the Shia world between the Hawzah (seminary) of Qom and the Hawzah of Najaf, or between the doctrine of "Guardianship of the Jurist" (Wilayat al-Faqih), of which Khamenei is currently considered the highest authority, and the traditional Twelver Shia doctrine, of which al-Sistani is considered the highest authority. Raisi's death has made the post-Khamenei period very challenging for the Islamic Revolution system in Iran.

As for the late Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, he had been associated with the Iraqi dossier since the beginning of his career in the Iranian diplomatic corps. From 1997 to 2001, Abdollahian served as the Deputy Iranian Ambassador in Baghdad. He then returned to Iran as the Deputy Director of Gulf Affairs at the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abdollahian was appointed Deputy Undersecretary of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Iraqi Affairs. Abdollahian remained in that position until 2006, when he served as the Head of

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the Iraqi Affairs Committee in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs until 2007. During his chairmanship of that committee, Abdollahian participated as Iran's representative in joint negotiations with the Iraqi and American sides regarding the then-turbulent situation in Iraq. From 2007 to 2010, Abdollahian served as Iran's ambassador to Bahrain. He returned to Tehran in 2010 to serve as the Deputy Foreign Minister for Gulf and Middle Eastern Affairs, and in 2011, Abdollahian became the Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs. In 2016, former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif dismissed Abdollahian from his position, seemingly due to their disagreements on implementing Iranian foreign policy in the region. After leaving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abdollahian worked as a Special Assistant to the Presidency of the Iranian Parliament until 2021, when he was appointed Foreign Minister by the late President Ebrahim Raisi.

Like the late President Raisi, the late Minister Abdollahian belonged to the political-ideological system deeply committed to the principles of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, with absolute loyalty to the Supreme Leader and adherence to his orders and directives.

Throughout his diplomatic career, Abdollahian maintained excellent relationships and communications with all the leaders of the Iran-supported political and armed factions in the region, known as the "Axis of Resistance," in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Palestine, and held dozens of meetings with them. These leaders, close to Iran, trusted Abdollahian and respected him deeply, considering him part of the inner circle of Supreme Leader Khamenei. After Abdollahian became Foreign Minister, he could meet with any of these leaders in a very short time and inform them of the updates on Iranian positions and policies regarding regional affairs and issues, compared to the longer time his predecessor Zarif needed for such meetings.

Abdollahian had an exceptional ability to transform the directives and visions of the Supreme Leader regarding Iranian orientations in the region into diplomatic action steps. Additionally, he was proficient in managing cooperation and coordination between diplomatic plans and the security plans of Iran's regional strategy. Abdollahian was considered the IRGC's man in Iranian diplomacy and was very close to General Soleimani and later to his successor, General Qaani.



Late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi speaks during the ceremony of the fourth anniversary of the Soleimani death at the Imam Khomeini Mosalla in Tehran, Iran on January 3, 2024.

In an article commemorating Abdollahian in the Iranian economic newspaper "Tejarat," former Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Mohsen Pak Ayeen stated: "One of the most significant achievements of the late Abdollahian was establishing a connection between diplomacy and the military field, coordinating them to ensure the success of military plans, highlighting their results, and completing them diplomatically." Ayeen added: "Abdollahian's great interest and sincere cooperation with General Qassem Soleimani, which continued under General Qaani's leadership of the Quds Force, led to effective coordination between the military field and diplomacy." We can say that the weight of Iran's loss of the late Minister Abdollahian is comparable to the loss of Soleimani.

IRAN'S POLICY TOWARDS IRAQ AFTER THE PASSING OF RAISI AND ABDOLLAHIAN

After Raisi's passing, the candidature for the presidency was opened on May 30 for five days. At the end of the registration period, 80 candidates were announced for the presidential elections to be held on June 28. After being "filtered" by the Guardian Council, the final list of eligible candidates was announced on June 9, which included the following six names:

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf: The Speaker of the Iranian Parliament and former commander of the IRGC, is from the traditional conservatives. Ghalibaf has run for the presidency twice before and failed. In the third

instance, he was forced to withdraw his candidature in favour of Raisi to avoid splitting the conservative votes.

Saeed Jalili: The Supreme Leader's representative in the Supreme National Security Council of Iran and a hardline loyalist to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Jalili ran in the 2021 presidential elections and then withdrew in favour of Raisi. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Imam Sadiq University in Tehran.

Alireza Zakani: The Mayor of Tehran, a physician with a degree in nuclear medicine and former head of the "Basij" Students Organization. He has been a member of parliament for several terms and is considered a hardline conservative.

Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi: A doctor and politician, he served multiple terms in parliament and is a member of the Stability Front of the Islamic Revolution, one of the most hardline fundamentalist parties in Iran. Ghazizadeh ran for the presidency in 2021 but did not win. He is regarded as one of the most hardline neo-conservatives.

Mostafa Pourmohammadi: A cleric, lawyer, and politician. He was the Minister of the Interior under President Ahmadinejad and the Minister of Justice under President Rouhani. Pourmohammadi is considered a traditional conservative.

Masoud Pezeshkian: A parliamentarian from Tabriz and a former Minister of Health. Pezeshkian is considered a reformist.

All five conservative candidates have a chance of winning. The presence of the reformist Pezeshkian among the candidates may motivate voters who typically abstain

from participating in elections to vote this time, potentially leading to the election going to two rounds. The second round is likely to be between one of the candidates (Ghalibaf or Jalili) on one side and Pezeshkian on the other. If there are any surprises in these elections, the biggest one would be the winning of Amir Ghazizadeh Hashemi.

Iran certainly has an abundance of suitable political figures for the positions of President and Foreign Minister. However, concerning Iran's policy towards Iraq, Iran needs specific qualities in those who will be in these positions to enable them to maintain the gains Iran has made in Iraq since 2003 and to preserve the nature of the prevailing relations between the Iranian political-security decision-making centre and the political, security, and social centres of decision and influence in Iraq.

The landscape of Iranian-Iraqi relations after Soleimani's passing tells us a lot about the potential scenario for these relations after the passing of Raisi and Abdollahian. During Soleimani's era, the Iraqi political-armed forces supported by Iran were more committed to Iranian advice and directives and more aligned with Iranian orientations in the region. The leaders of these forces adhered strictly to the political and security roles proposed to them by Soleimani within a collective work structure, and they were satisfied and convinced by the guiding leadership role that Soleimani played with them. They felt deep down that Iran, and Soleimani in particular, were instrumental in forming their political and armed forces and strengthening their role in the Iraqi arena. General Soleimani had capabilities, experience, and skills in dealing with situations in Iraq that no other Iranian official possessed. Soleimani

performed security and political roles to protect Iranian interests in Iraq and sometimes also played economic roles.

But, after the death of Soleimani, the leaders of the Iran-backed political-armed forces became more inclined to act independently, and their tendency towards coordinated and directed collective action from Iran weakened while they continued to maintain their loyalty to Iran and its axis (the Axis of Resistance). Each leader of these forces began to see himself as a commander who should not be led. Even the Iraqi governments became more daring and independent in their dealings with Iran after the era of Soleimani.

The upcoming Iranian policy towards Iraq will follow one of two options, with no third alternative. The first option, which is a traditional approach Iran has adopted for decades, involves inciting the Iran-aligned Iraqi political-armed forces to resume targeting US-Western interests in Iraq as part of an escalation campaign that includes all of Iran's proxies in the region, in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, to push the US and the West to ease the pressures on Iran. The second option is to support the stability of Iraq and seek to calm the situation in the Iraqi arena, a rational choice

that understands the challenges and transformations in the region and Iraq and serves Iran's economic interests in this country.

Whether the next president of Iran and his government come from the political-ideological system linked to Supreme Leader Khamenei, traditional conservatives, or neo-conservatives, certainly they will not have the same level of involvement with the Iraqi file that Soleimani, Raisi, and Abdollahian had. Additionally, the leaders of the Iran-aligned Iraqi political-armed forces will not respond to them with the same level of compliance they showed to their predecessors. Moreover, the entire region is currently undergoing significant political and security transformations. Consequently, it will be necessary for the new president and his foreign minister to approach the Iraqi arena from a different perspective and reality than the previous era, compelling Iran to adopt new methods to implement its policies aimed at preserving its interests in Iraq.

It is expected that Iran will intensify its dealings with the Iraqi government and reduce its interactions with Iraqi non-state actors. This means that the Iraqi file will be a shared responsibility before the Su-

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The Late Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian attends the ceremony of the fourth anniversary of the Soleimani death at the Imam Khomeini Mosalla in Tehran, Iran, on January 3, 2024.

preme Leader, involving several Iranian government entities, and will not be exclusive to the Quds Force and its commander, General Qa'ani. This also includes maintaining Iran's relations with the armed factions integrated into the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and reducing its relations with factions outside the PMF framework. It is well known that there are dozens of Iran-backed armed factions operating in the Iraqi arena outside the PMF framework.

It is also expected that Iran will have to reduce its interventions in Iraq's internal affairs (not abstain completely!) to repair its reputation on the Iraqi street, which has been significantly damaged by its previous policies. The stereotypical image of Iran that has developed over the past years in Iraq

public opinion is that it is the most powerful actor in shaping the political landscape in Iraq. This ranges from intervening in the arrangement of electoral alliances and election results to influencing the formation of governments and the selection of the Prime Minister. Iran's influence and sway over the political process in Iraq have come to encompass all political forces, regardless of their background, orientations, and sectarian or ethnic affiliations.

The governments of the region showed great sympathy and genuine condolences to Iran over the incident of the presidential helicopter crash. This stance might prompt Iran to reconsider its regional policies and move towards cooperative trajectories instead of conflictual ones. Iran may shift to-

wards developing its relations with the governments of the region rather than with non-state actors.

On the other hand, Iran might have to adopt more moderate policies regarding the Iraqi file in the post-Raisi period to create favourable conditions for resuming its talks with the US and the West about the Iranian nuclear issue and the sanctions imposed on Iran. Just as Iraq was a battlefield for the US-Iran confrontation, it can also become a platform for US-Iran dialogue.

CONCLUSION

Whether the next president of Iran and his government come from the political-ideological system linked to Supreme Leader Khamenei, traditional conservatives, or neo-conservatives, it is not expected that there will be a significant change in Iran's policy towards Iraq, whose strategic framework is determined by the Supreme Leader. However, it is anticipated that there will be changes at the level of the individual performance of the new Iranian officials regarding how to implement the Supreme Leader's

directives and instructions related to the policies to be followed towards Iraq, taking into account the constants and variables of Iranian policy.

We can say that the primary duty of the Presidency in Iran is to absorb internal political, security, and economic shocks, while the main duty of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is to absorb external shocks.

The incident involving the loss of Raisi and Abdollahian, along with Iran's preoccupation with arranging its internal affairs after that incident, might compel Iran to reconsider its policies towards Iraqi affairs.

It is expected that the presidential elections in Iran will proceed smoothly, especially since the deep state within the "Islamic Revolution" system in Iran has a great ability to engineer the elections in line with their preferences. However, the real challenge that the "Islamic Revolution" system in Iran will face after Raisi's death is the succession of Khamenei and finding a suitable figure for this position who meets the requirements of a religious and political career.

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