

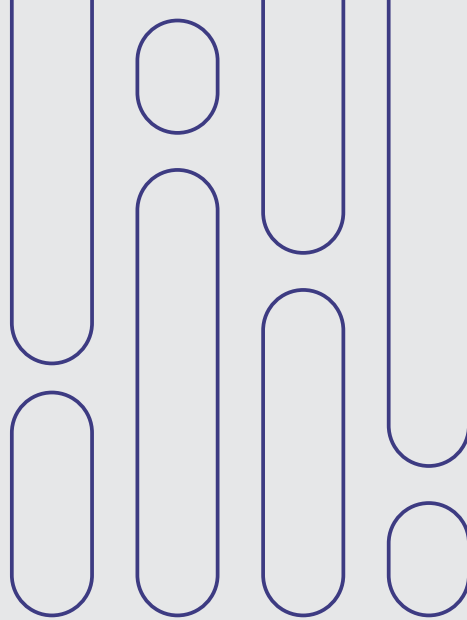
**Study**

# **Ebrahim Raisi: Ambiguous Future for Iran's Foreign Policy**

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## Introduction

Ebrahim Raisi took office amid internal, and external crises and challenges, considered the most difficult since the 1979 revolution. The new Iranian president is facing mushrooming economic and diplomatic crises along with social woes. Regional countries, particularly the Gulf states, hope that the new president will start a fresh chapter of regional relations based on cooperation and build bridges of trust to guarantee the stability, security, and vital economic interests of the region. However, the light of hope has been waning, with most indicators forecasting that Iran's policy is tilting towards further extremism and escalation at all levels, not only at home but also at the regional and global level. Raisi fully adopts the position of the supreme leader. He is known for his close ties with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and his notorious human rights violations. He was a member of the Death Committee, which supervised the executions of thousands of Iranian opponents under the direct supervision of Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini. His electoral win was not only a shock and source of distress for the world, but also for Iran's elite at home. Raisi is not the only IRGC linked person who came to power; other revolutionaries were also nominated to the government — most of them are former IRGC officers or have strong ties to the IRGC.

This study sheds light on four major topics: the implications of the revolutionaries' unprecedented dominance over power in Iran; the prevailing pessimism regarding the revival of the nuclear deal with Iran; rising mutual escalation between Iran and Israel that has caused disturbances in the region; and the difficulty in reaching a political understanding and inclusive reconciliation with Saudi Arabia despite positive remarks from both

sides.

The study mainly argues that all the indications, from the beginning of Raisi's assumption of power, do not bode well for the future. In the upcoming years, we are unlikely to see a decrease in Iran's sectarianism, nor in its proxy wars in the region. Furthermore, constructive negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs with the international community seem unlikely. Iran is not expected to reduce its cyber, maritime, missile, and drone attacks. Rather, it will continue to present a strategic dilemma, thus hindering any form of stability and peaceful coexistence in the Middle East, unless the people at home, who are suffering from deteriorating living conditions, stage a popular uprising that undermines the fundamental pillars of the political system itself, or the international community resorts to adopting constructive strategic resolutions against Iran's arrogance and violations of international law – which will push it to reconsider its strategic calculations, halt its offensive policies, and adopt the language of dialogue and partnership as the sole basis for resolving disagreements.

## **1- Indications of the Revolutionaries' Unprecedented Dominance Over Power**

The primary concern, which is the main indication of Iran's increasing arrogance in the coming years is that the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has successfully managed to place all the pillars of the ruling system under the grip of the "hardliners" and former IRGC officers, who follow the principles of the Iranian revolution and the positions of the supreme leader. The political equation made up of the "reformists" and "conservatives" has become somewhat irrelevant. Raisi announced that his government functions in accordance with the principles of

the Iranian revolution and the approach of its founder, Ruhollah Khomeini. His remarks clearly affirm that he will be directed by and submit to the supreme leader. His remarks also indicate that he will not operate beyond his remit like past presidents who tried to do so and his rise to power is to ensure an overhaul of the social system so that it is in line with Iran's revolutionary ideology.

Today we witness a comprehensive transformation in Iran's political system, including its councils and executive government, into one absolute power-centric approach and vision in order to implement the orders of the supreme leader and his close inner circle of decision-makers. This means that the regional countries need to forge new policies to address a looming crisis. This is quite likely, given the speech delivered by Raisi during his swearing-in ceremony at the Iranian Parliament. "We will stand by the oppressed, whether they are in Europe or the United States, in Yemen, Syria or Palestine [...] We will be the voice of the oppressed and commit to the principles of the Islamic Revolution," Raisi said in his speech.<sup>1</sup> He confirmed before everybody that he came to power to revive the zest and spirit of the revolution, and to further translate revolutionary rhetoric into reality. In addition, he confirmed that he would remain committed to the revolution's principles and ideological values.

It is worth mentioning that the circumstances surrounding the election, which led to the disqualification of other candidates and full backing for Raisi to win the presidency, provide solid evidence that he came to power at a critical stage in light of the need to safely transfer power post-Khamenei, i.e., to consolidate Velayat-e Faqih as the bedrock of Iran's ruling system. Raisi, quite apparently, is the most likely person to succeed

Khamenei even though he has not been granted yet the honorific title of ayatollah, which is given to high-ranking Twelver Shiite clergy. The sitting Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had the title of *hojatoleslam* before succeeding Khomeini; a lower rank than ayatollah. He was immediately bestowed with the title of ayatollah after becoming supreme leader as the rank is a precondition for the supreme leader's post. Khamenei's case might be repeated with Raisi. Probably, interest lobbies of Iranian political, military, and religious elites will unanimously agree on Raisi to be the next supreme leader — just like the case of Khamenei. Raisi, from the very beginning is fully supported by the supreme leader and all the authorities and institutions of the ruling system in addition to state-run media outlets. "Following the people's choice, I task the wise, indefatigable, experienced and popular *Hojatoleslam* Ebrahim Raisi as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran," Khamenei wrote in a decree read out by his chief of staff at the inauguration ceremony.<sup>2</sup> The flattering remarks of the supreme leader indicate his strong support for Raisi.

To consolidate the revolutionaries further in power, Iran's new Parliament elected Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, a "conservative" leader and a former IRGC general as its new speaker, succeeding Ali Larijani who supported former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and was an advocate of nuclear talks with the West. In contrast, Ghalibaf harshly criticized Rouhani's performance and described the nuclear talks with the United States as "useless and harmful," adding, "Our strategy toward the terroristic America is to complete our vengeance for the blood of the martyr Soleimani."<sup>3</sup> Ghalibaf has played a critical role in making the Iranian Parliament adopt extreme policies towards commencing nuclear talks with the United States.

The dominance of the revolutionaries is not limited to the presidency and Parliament, it also includes the judiciary. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed former Intelligence and Security Minister Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i as Iran's chief justice to succeed Raisi. This raised the concerns of human rights observers on the future of Iran's human rights record because the new chief justice has been accused of repressing intellectuals and cracking down on political activists when he was working in the judiciary and during his time as Iran's intelligence and security minister in Ahmadinejad's government.

President Raisi appointed Mohammad Mokhber, president of the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO) and a former IRGC commander, as his first vice president. Mokhber was blacklisted by the US Treasury in January. Iranian legislators provided a vote of confidence to 18 out of the 19 ministers proposed by President Raisi, most of the new ministers are linked to the "conservatives." In forming the new Iranian government, Raisi mainly selected candidates who are linked to the "conservatives," and some of them had worked under the former Ahmadinejad administration. No woman was included in Raisi's 19-member government. This raised concerns that Raisi might seek to undermine women's rights. Further, his list did not include any Sunni candidate, which indicates that the sitting government will widen the gap of sectarianism and sexism between Iranians by exercising blatant discrimination.

His list also included candidates who have been accused of involvement in terrorism or corruption and individuals who have held high-ranking posts in the IRGC and former governments with accusations of involvement in suspicious corruption cases. The lion's share of ministerial appointments were in favor of IRGC commanders. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, a former Iranian

diplomat close to the IRGC's Quds Force, was appointed as Iran's foreign minister.<sup>4</sup> Amir-Abdollahian has strong ties with Iran's regional proxies; the so-called "Axis of Resistance," most prominently Iraqi militias and the Lebanese Hezbollah. He is known to embrace the positions of the supreme leader. Amir-Abdollahian has carried out diplomatic missions with Iran's neighboring countries. He was a main member of the delegation which negotiated with American officials in Baghdad in 2007 over Iraq's security situation post-US invasion.<sup>5</sup> This means that he is well-versed in Gulf affairs. His involvement in foreign affairs once again indicates that Iran's future foreign policy will not be open to others, something all regional countries are waiting for.

Ahmad Vahidi, a former IRGC general, was appointed as minister of interior; it is his second ministerial post after taking up the defense portfolio during the second tenure of the Ahmadinejad government (2009-2013). He is wanted by Interpol for his role in the bombing of a Jewish community center (AMIA) in Buenos Aires. By appointing Vahidi as a minister of interior, the IRGC has maintained a firm grip over most of Iran's ministries. This will allow the IRGC to consolidate its control and supervision over Iran's internal security apparatuses which implement the directives of Iran's ruling system. Based on the "hardliner" approach of President Raisi, it is likely that the Ministry of Interior will impose harsh protocols against protests in Iran, every now and then.

Mohammad Reza Ashtiani was appointed as defense minister. He was sanctioned by Washington in 2020, and since July 2019, served as Iran's deputy chief of staff of its armed forces. His ministerial program submitted to the Parliament included: internal and external concerns; future projects to advance Iran's policies in the upcoming phase; the listing of the main pillars



and principles of Iran's political system in relation to continuing political and military support for terrorist groups across the region and the world; and the legitimization of Iran's intervention in other countries' affairs. He confirmed the government's commitment to developing Iran's ballistic missile program as the country's most prominent form of deterrence. This is in addition to advancing the weapons capability of the Iranian navy amid the current snowballing conflicts in the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>6</sup>

Esmail Khatib was appointed as minister of security and intelligence. He had served as director of the Intelligence Office for 12 consecutive years since 1991. Later, he served as the director of the Protection and Information Center of the judiciary for seven years. After he was suspended from his post during the Ahmadinejad tenure, he served as the director of the Supreme Leader's Office in Qom. This means that he is close to the supreme leader who approved his nomination to the current post. In defense of his ministerial program, Khatib said, "[The unknown soldiers of Imam az-Zaman (the Imam of all time)] dedicated all of their efforts to establishing security in these countries. They have sacrificed themselves in countering enemies, plots, sedition, and agents of the arrogant front, armed groups, and spies. Thus, we have to remember and honor them."<sup>7</sup>

Nominating "hardliners" to represent the new government indicates that the political establishment realizes that its popularity has been eroded and that it is ready to do whatever is necessary to maintain its cohesion, power, and revolutionary path. This means Iran is heading backwards not forwards and this path does not reflect the aspirations of the Iranian people; the majority are young who have experienced dramatic changes and aspire for real change and reform. They want to lift Iran

from its slumber so that it can meet its financial needs and deal with growing socioeconomic woes. Their aspirations cannot be compromised, neither can they be oppressed by the Iranian government, otherwise it risks domestic uprisings.

## **2- Indications of Political Will to Acquire Nuclear Weapons**

The second prominent indication of the dominance of the “hard-line” approach and the Iranian political system’s escalating behavior is the growing international concern over the nuclear talks and expectations that they will not end successfully as Tehran is expected to create more impediments and waste more time in order to further enrich uranium so that it reaches the level of producing a nuclear bomb. If the political system manages to cross the nuclear threshold, its popular legitimacy will grow. The system will have a stronger grip over power and eliminate the opportunities available to those wanting to liberalize Iran’s economy and society. Possessing a nuclear bomb will also help Iran achieve its ambitions of regional leadership; making it the most potent and prominent power in the Islamic world and a “dominant regional power.”

It seems that Iranian leaders believe that possessing nuclear weapons will halt Washington from resisting Tehran’s internal and external policies. The United States, at this point in time, will not be willing to confront the nuclear-weapon state: Iran. This is similar to Washington’s position on North Korea; the United States is seemingly not prepared yet to confront it. The Iranian political system succeeded in mobilizing popular support for its high-cost civilian nuclear program and promoted it as a source of national pride and a sign of military development. President Raisi on August 5, 2021 said, “The sanctions

against Iran must be lifted... and we will support any diplomatic initiative that helps achieve this goal.”<sup>8</sup> However, Iran’s nuclear archive seized by Israel and confirmed by former President Rouhani clearly shows the country’s insistence on developing nuclear weapons.

We cannot believe Iran’s claims that it does not intend to develop nuclear weapons. If Tehran is truly willing not to do so, the government could have adopted alternatives with much less cost to raise its enrichment capacity. Moreover, it could have established civilian nuclear programs to produce electricity by using imported fuel, an alternative that has always been on the table and always rejected by Iran.

Iran has developed its nuclear capacity to an extent that meant that international efforts to halt it turned out to be fruitless. It is not easy now for Iran to give up on the nuclear achievements that it has secured over the three years since Washington’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Iran feels that it does not have to comply with the deal’s commitments anymore. This raised the concerns of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). “We have a country that has a very developed and ambitious nuclear program which is enriching at very high levels ... very close to weapons grade,” IAEA Director Rafael Grossi said.<sup>9</sup>

Iran had declared that it would reduce its commitments stipulated under the 2015 nuclear deal. Its enrichment level now exceeds the 3.67 percent limit set by the nuclear deal, and it breaches the 300-kilogram limit. Iran also installed more advanced centrifuges, especially in Natanz nuclear facility where an explosion occurred recently. “On 14 August 2021, the Agency verified ... that Iran had used 257 grams of uranium enriched up to 20 percent U-235 in the form of UF<sub>4</sub> (uranium tetrafluoride) to produce 200 grams of uranium metal enriched up to

20 percent U-235,” stated the IAEA.<sup>10</sup> The Iranian government made further breaches; it declared on June 15 that it had produced 6.5 kilograms of uranium enriched up to 60 percent purity.<sup>11</sup> This development means that Iran has acquired the necessary knowledge and material to produce a nuclear bomb. It is no longer difficult for Tehran to increase uranium enrichment up to 90 percent; the grade needed to build a nuclear bomb.

According to the IAEA quarterly report, Iran’s total stockpile of enriched uranium as of February 16 was nearly 3 tons, up from 2.4 tons in November, exceeding the limit designated in the 2015 nuclear deal; 202.8 kilograms.<sup>12</sup> Six months after the publication of the IAEA report, Iran’s uranium stockpile stands around 4 tons, the amount needed to produce a nuclear bomb. This explains why some American reports confirm that Iran, within less than one year, can produce a nuclear bomb if it continues to develop centrifuges and produce enriched uranium. Iran has repeatedly confirmed its advancement in its nuclear program in recent months, this is probably an Iranian claim to use as leverage against the Biden administration — to eventually mitigate sanctions in return for limiting its nuclear activities. However, some experts say that the real quantity of Iran’s enriched uranium is much higher than the announced figure.

It is likely that Iran may undertake further steps to possess nuclear weapons. The IAEA only accessed Iran’s nuclear data since June 24, 2021; it did not access its data since February 2021. At the time, Iran managed to limit the access of the UN watchdog’s inspectors to the Natanz nuclear facility in July 2021. It started producing uranium metal exceeding 20 percent and installed more sophisticated centrifuges. The Iranian Parliament tightened measures related to implementing its bill entitled “Strategic Action Plan to Lift Sanctions and Protect the Ira-

nian Nation's Interest," which was passed on December 2020. The bill aimed to speed up the country's uranium enrichment and limit IAEA inspections.<sup>13</sup>

The United States, in the Vienna nuclear talks, adopted an escalatory policy. It did not announce all of its conditions to avoid closing the door on negotiations. In the sixth round of the talks, the US vision became completely clear. Iran on August 2, 2021, disclosed the US conditions, which included the inclusion of other files in order to reach a new agreement. The other files included Iran's expansionist activities such as its intervention in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen and its ballistic missile program. In addition, the United States wanted to maintain the arms embargo on Iran and amend the existing nuclear text. These conditions meant that Washington sought to forge a new nuclear deal, which Iran absolutely rejected.

Further, not only has Washington kept in place the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration but it has also imposed new ones. In response to Iran's attacks on US troops in Syria and Iraq, Washington adopted military deterrence. It also seriously endeavors to rebuild a transatlantic consensus, and to cooperate with some countries in the region, against Iran. This was apparent in Washington's response to Iran's attack on MT Mercer Street, an Israeli tanker. "We join our partners and allies in our strong condemnation of the attack against the Mercer Street, a commercial ship that was peacefully transiting through the north Arabian Sea in international waters," Antony Blinken said in a press statement. He further confirmed that the United States was confident of Iran's involvement in the attack, adding that Washington was working with its partners for "an appropriate response."<sup>14</sup>

With Raisi now in power, it has become quite unlikely Iran and

Western countries will be able to reach an agreement in regard to the 2015 nuclear deal because Tehran has already crossed the limit needed to develop nuclear weapons. Therefore, it will not allow its new activities to be stopped and its recently developed capacity following the US withdrawal from the deal. The United States will not agree to lift all sanctions, which Iran demands as a precondition for the talks. As a result, Washington is not interested anymore in the ongoing talks with Iran. Tehran will stay committed to its conditions, continue its policy of procrastination while making use of time to advance its nuclear capacity; the world may be shocked by Iran manufacturing its first nuclear bomb. If they reach an agreement, it will be fragile. By concluding a deal, the US president meets his campaign promise but the agreement will not be able to curb Iran's ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons and develop its ballistic missile program, neither can it halt its expansionist projects in the region.

Iran's stubbornness is evident; it refused to revive the nuclear deal, was inflexible in the nuclear talks, and laid down conditions that will not be accepted by the international community. By analyzing the recent remarks of Iranian officials, it becomes apparent that the new Iranian president defended what he called the "economy of resistance" as he aims to make the Iranian economy more resilient against shocks. This concept is based on the claim that the country does not need trade openness with the world. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei echoed this approach when meeting with former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his cabinet. He argued that the policy of openness adopted by the Rouhani government towards the West, particularly, the United States confirmed "trust in the West is useless." He expressed a pessimistic view in regard to reviving the nucle-

ar deal in light of the US conditions related to Tehran's ballistic missile program. The supreme leader scathingly criticized Rouhani's negotiation policy and his government betting on the West, confirming that any negotiations with Washington are currently impossible.<sup>15</sup> This Iranian stance has not come about haphazardly, it has been deliberately planned by the supreme leader. As long as Iran's policy is under the grip of the current "hardline" authority, it is unlikely that its "hardline" position on returning to the nuclear talks with specific conditions is merely symbolic. Iran is adopting a policy of brinkmanship to revive the nuclear deal and reap strategic gains while avoiding making any integral concessions, especially regarding US conditions about its ballistic missile program and regional influence. Practically speaking, the Iranian political system has been prepared to face a new phase of resistance and confrontation; the gradual US withdrawal from the region has helped Iran in this matter. The main concern here is that Iran will be tempted to move further forward in its secret nuclear program and cross the nuclear threshold to keep in place the current political system.

### **3. The Expansion of the "Shadow War" Between Israel and Iran**

The third indicator that forebodes Iran will witness a greater dark period is the rising escalation in the so-called *shadow war* between Iran and Israel. The long-running shadow war has been instigated from the relentless conflict between Israel and Iran; a war that takes place on all fronts: sea, air, cyberspace, and sometimes on the ground. Israel targeted tankers smuggling oil from Iran to Syria, part of its sale profits were sent to Hezbollah. The sea attacks are only part of a much broader Israeli military action. Israel has launched several attacks against Iranian

targets, including sites of Iranian proxies: Hezbollah and other Shiite militias.

It is widely believed that Israel is behind the assassination of five Iranian nuclear scientists since 2010 and the attacks on nuclear sites inside Iranian territory. Iran held Israel and the United States responsible for the assassination of scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in an ambush on the outskirts of the Iranian capital, Tehran, October 2020. In another incident, Iran pointed the finger of blame at Israel for the explosion at the Natanz nuclear facility, Iran's largest uranium enrichment facility, causing severe damage to centrifuges. Israel is convinced that Iran's nuclear program has a military dimension and this will enable Tehran to build a nuclear bomb; an existential threat for the Israelis.

Since Ibrahim Raisi was declared the winner of the election, the escalation between Iran and Israel has dominated the scene. An Israeli oil tanker was attacked off the coast of Oman at the end of July 2021, and Israel pointed the finger at Iran. This incident also raised warnings that the United Kingdom, which lost a crew member in the attack, might be involved in any retaliatory action and could possibly join the United States, which established a naval force with its partners in 2019 to help protect sea lanes in the Middle East.

A week after the ship incident, officials in the Israeli Prime Minister's Office and the Defense Minister's Office held meetings on the attack with senior officials in the Biden administration. Meanwhile, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on all UN Security Council members states to condemn the incident, and made it clear to them that Israel considered the attack to be very dangerous. Israel identified Iran as the perpetrator and argued that the incident was a serious threat to the security of international shipping.



Iran activated its proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah. The Israeli army and Hezbollah exchanged cross-border fire in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah announced for the first time since the last military escalation in 2019 that it targeted Israeli sites. And it was also the first time since 2014 that southern Lebanon has witnessed an Israeli air attack.

The accelerating tensions between Iran and Israel prompted Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, in his speech to the Knesset, to state that he would not rule out the possibility that Israel might take military action against Iran, even if unilaterally, and Gantz warned that there were “hundreds of Iranian UAVs in Iran, Yemen, Iraq and other countries last year [...] There have been no less than five Iranian attacks on international ships, some using UAVs manufactured by Iran.”<sup>16</sup>

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz in early August during his meetings with the ambassadors of UN Security Council member states, claimed that Iran needs 10 weeks to obtain the materials needed to make a nuclear weapon. Both Gantz and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid warned the United States that Iran is approaching the nuclear threshold.<sup>17</sup>

Given this escalation between Iran and Israel, US Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns visited Israel. As some sources say, he came to remind Israel of the interests and policies of its ally, Washington, and to see if Israel is fully aware and in agreement with the US position in regard to Iran’s nuclear advancement. In addition, he wanted to acknowledge Israel’s deep reservations on a new nuclear deal with Iran. It is possible that Burns came to warn Israel to be cautious and to display restraint in its public discourse, and to de-escalate its naval conflict with Iran, at least for the time being.<sup>18</sup>

Amid the rising tensions between Iran and Israel, the new Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, visited Washington and met with President Biden. Bennett warned the Americans of the consequences of the new nuclear deal, especially in light of Iran's progress in advancing its nuclear capabilities. "[We will] deal with many fronts, especially the Iranian front, and especially the jump in the Iranian nuclear program over the past two or three years. In particular, we will discuss the plan to block this program," Bennett said during the meeting. According to the Prime Minister's Office, he added that talks would also focus on "several actions to strengthen Israeli military superiority."<sup>19</sup> It seems that Washington is ready to support Israel, and it may provide the Israeli army with the necessary military technology to inflict severe damage on Iran's nuclear potential, or at least deter Iran so that it returns to the nuclear agreement.

The most significant statement was Biden's warning to Iran, "We're putting diplomacy first and we'll see where that takes us. But if diplomacy fails, we're ready to turn to other options."<sup>20</sup> Biden's statement was strongly condemned by the Iranian government, especially by the supreme leader, who described the Biden administration as a "predatory wolf," and said it was no less abrasive than the Trump administration.<sup>21</sup> This escalation indicates that the long-simmering tensions between Iran and the United States and its ally Israel are most likely to mount further in the future. It is also possible that US-Israeli military coordination will increase to target Iranian nuclear facilities if efforts to revive the agreement fail.

In the same vein, American expert Dennis Ross, the US point man for the Middle East peace process in both the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administra-

tions, said to *Bloomberg* that the Biden administration, according to the demands of some in Congress, should consider providing Israel with missiles such as “The GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator,” a 30,000 pound mountain penetrator. This is a weapon that could be used to destroy Iran’s underground enrichment facility at Fordow and other fortified nuclear sites. The willingness to provide Israel with such a terrifying weapon and the use of a B2 bomber to deliver it will send a strong message to the Iranians. In fact, providing Israel with the GBU-57 missile might be the best incentive for Iran to negotiate a “longer and stronger” nuclear deal” .Only then might the regime accept that the United States is serious about preventing Iran from acquiring a threshold status — and that Iran risks its entire nuclear infrastructure in the absence of an agreement .Under such circumstances” ,Iran’s leaders have an incentive to agree something now which the U.S .and Israel might otherwise oppose “.Dennis Ross added<sup>22</sup>.

We accordingly conclude that given the supreme leader’s and Raisi’s continuous attempts to impede the nuclear talks to facilitate Tehran’s quest to reach the nuclear threshold ,it is possible that the United States will allow Israel to launch preemptive air strikes to destroy Iran’s uranium enrichment facilities or inflict severe damage on these facilities .This might hold Iran back from achieving its goals for many years to come. Thus ,we are quite likely to witness in the coming months a noticeable rise in tensions between Tel Aviv and Tehran .As a result ,we are expected to witness uncontrollable escalation spirals that might lead to a serious crisis if either side makes a single mistake .Without a doubt ,it is a turbulent start for Raisi’s presidency ,opening the door for more tensions and the

likelihood of military responses from Tehran on the one side and Israel and its Western allies and the United States on the other side, given the growing fear that the region will be driven by the logic of military warfare.

#### **4. The Challenges of Diplomatic Normalization With Saudi Arabia**

Tehran's relationship with its great neighbor Saudi Arabia is one of the biggest challenges facing Iranian foreign policy under Raisi for the coming years. Historically, the conflict between Riyadh and Tehran has gone through many ups and downs. Saudi Arabia severed its diplomatic relations with Tehran following the 2016 attack on the Saudi embassy by an Iranian mob. Consequently, dialogue and negotiation initiatives have been blocked. However, some regional factors raise the possibility that the two parties will sit at the negotiating table to reduce tensions.

Some Iranian politicians realize that a good relationship with Saudi Arabia will impact Iran's communication with other Arab and Islamic countries, and its problems, even with the international community, will be easier to resolve via a good relationship with Riyadh, which has influence and political weight in international decision-making centers. The Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, said in a television interview, "At the end of the day, Iran is a neighboring country. All we ask for is to have a good and distinguished relationship with Iran [...] to drive prosperity and growth in the region and the entire world." Yet he pointed out to thorny issues hindering reaching this end: Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs and proxy militias in some countries in the region.<sup>23</sup>

Currently, Saudi Arabia is holding talks with Iran mediated by

Iraq. Although the two parties have welcomed the talks, they seem thorny and may not make any progress, at least in the coming period. Saudi Arabia demands that Iran must stop supporting its proxy wars in Arab countries, especially support for the Houthis in Yemen and supplying them with missiles and drones — which have been targeting Saudi territory at an increasing pace. In addition, Iran must comply with its obligations under the nuclear deal, and halt its missile program, which is the greatest external threat to the national security of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. However, the Iranian government, apparently, does not intend to make any concessions related to Saudi demands although Iranian officials have made political remarks, affirming their country's willingness to establish good relations with Saudi Arabia.

Rouhani himself clearly expressed his country's willingness to establish amicable relations with Saudi Arabia, accusing some internal parties of being responsible for deteriorating relations with Riyadh. "May God does not forgive those who did not allow us to have good relations with some neighbors. Some groups engaged "in childish and stupid" actions and "attacked diplomatic missions. If these actions had not taken place we would be in a better situation," Rouhani said.<sup>24</sup> President Raisi echoed Rouhani's remarks saying, "strengthening and building comprehensive relations with neighboring countries is one of the priorities of the government that we will form," considering that "such relations serve both Iran and its neighboring countries as well."<sup>25</sup>

Saudi Arabia is used to such positive remarks from all Iranian presidents but they do not lead to concrete results. This is because there is a lack of political will on behalf of the supreme

leader to put words into practice via respecting the rights of neighbors and establishing stability in the region. Although the main thorny issue between Riyadh and Tehran will be discussing the Yemeni crisis, more comprehensive files will determine the chances of rapprochement, dialogue and future relations. Will the Iranian government continue with its longstanding policy? Or will it adopt a new position?

In fact, Tehran will continue to negotiate tactically as it did before, but not to reach strategic solutions to resolve all outstanding problems. Tehran has always impeded possibilities for dialogue in order to gain more time and it has shown no real intention to reach a comprehensive peace. The Iranian government, especially in the current stage which is witnessing the domination of the “hardliners” over all state apparatuses, will remain faithful to the principles of the revolution, and the Iranian Constitution. In addition, it will embrace comprehensive strategic plans such as the Theory of Umm al-Qura. There is a protracted crisis regarding religious representation between Tehran and Riyadh. Iran is seeking to emerge from this crisis as an Islamic model to be emulated. Iran always wants to go against logic and time, and to wrest the religious position from Riyadh, which explains its constant attacks against Saudi Arabia during the Hajj season and the politicization of religious rituals. There is also the problem of Iran’s ideological project in the region; it contains, at its heart, the export of the revolution and using Shiites as a tool of pressure which must be curbed and discussed until a real stability of relations is guaranteed. In light of Iran’s ideological project, dialogue between the two countries will not lead to comprehensive rapprochement, nor to drastic solutions to address complex strategic dilemmas, which have

emerged in various fields.

## **Conclusion**

All the previously discussed indicators show that Iranian foreign policy under the new government of President Ebrahim Raisi will adopt a "hardline" approach that will be enhanced by the support of the supreme leader himself who oversees the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, which is the pivotal entity in shaping strategic defense and security policies. Therefore, the international community, the region, and the Gulf countries neighboring Iran will never see Tehran adopting moderation in its political and security behavior nor constructive and pragmatic foreign and diplomatic interactions at least during Raisi's term in office — which may extend to another presidential term. All parties are expected to face difficult years, through which they will focus predominantly on crisis management rather than on launching dialogue and forging rapprochement. Thus, the Arab countries, the Gulf states in particular, need to adopt a different approach towards Iran's hegemonic tendencies. This is through using all means available based on comprehensive approaches that are capable of triggering Iran's political awareness and making it realize its potential losses and gains in case it continues to adopt its revolutionary ideology, promote a military confrontational approach, mobilize sectarian Velayat-e Faqih supporters, and operate beyond the framework of international legitimacy.

## Endnote

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