

# IRAN

## 1400 BRIEF

۱۴۰۰

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

ایران



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Middle East and North Africa

SPECIAL EDITION



# CONTEXT



While two months before the 18 June presidential election in the Islamic Republic of Iran no one knew who will run, now the result of the upcoming elections is completely predictable. Indeed, with the Guardian Council's recent decision to dramatically limit the political spectrum of the candidates who have registered, Ebrahim Raisi has gained a phenomenal chance to win, due to two important factors.

The *most important factor* casting a shadow over the election and possibly paving the way for a Raisi victory is voter turnout, which is expected to be the lowest rate in any presidential election since the 1979 revolution. As such, the repetition of the voter turnout fiasco from last year's parliamentary elections (which, on their part, were the lowest since the revolution) is being feared by the regime. This voter apathy is due to the reluctance of supporters of the moderate faction who have become frustrated after the Rouhani administration failed to deliver on its political, economic, and social promises. While this disillusionment restricts the electoral chances for moderates, it provides an opportunity for hardliners to field more candidates, as their advocates have a close ideological affiliation with the Islamic Republic's "deep state" and will definitely participate in the election. The *second factor* is the lack of any powerful rival for Raisi. Especially, the disqualification of Ali Larijani, a conservative closer to Rouhani's views than those of hardliners, speaks volumes. His quite recent social media and media offensive in which he seemed to mimic the Rouhani campaigns in the past, suggested that a bipolar race between Raisi and him will be taking place.

It seems the hardliners' plan to fully monopolize power in their hands very much overshadows any desire to present elections in the Islamic Republic as a kind of legitimacy index for the system.

Raisi's unrivalled chances at the polls this time around has raised questions over what can be expected in terms of domestic politics and foreign policy under his presidency. In response, it is critically important to consider the role of the president in the Islamic Republic of Iran. For instance, the direction of Iran's regional policy and missile programme has not been different between the politically divergent Ahmadinejad and Rouhani administrations. Under the latter "moderate" presidency, Iran's investments in those areas have even increased. In another case in point, we should not forget that Iran's willingness to negotiate with the West on nuclear issues started in 2010 in secret talks between Tehran and Washington, precisely at a time when hardliners controlled the parliament as well as the presidency. In other words, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is not related to presidents. And currently, no matter who will win the election, Tehran will remain eager to revive the JCPOA as it needs to exit the economic quagmire created by former U.S. President Trump's "maximum pressure" sanctions regime.

Moreover, the declared intention of the Joe Biden administration to re-join the nuclear deal has given an opportunity to the Islamic Republic to remove the reformists from power. In many respects, especially in foreign affairs,

the key value of the so-called moderates is that they can influence the West within a "good cop, bad cop" scheme that urges concessions from the West sustained by the stern warning that in case of the West failing to do so, domestic hardliners opposed to any kind of engagement with the West will be markedly empowered.

**“Yet, this time around, the much-needed revival of the JCPOA with the Biden administration does not need the international prestige of “moderates”...”**

Rouhani presidency was met with harsh repression. As a result, we have arguably witnessed the emergence of widely held understanding among the Iranian people that there is no difference between hardliners and moderates. This relatively newly found realization has fuelled most Iranians' refusal to cast a vote in the upcoming election. According to ISPA, which is believed to conduct the most reliable polls in Iran, about 40% of participants have said they will cast a ballot. This is quite striking as the electoral participation rate has usually been beyond 70% in the past.





# CANDIDATES' PROFILES

AND THEIR ELECTORAL CHANCES  
(FROM 1 [NO CHANCE] TO 5 [GREAT CHANCE])



# EBRAHIM RAISI

## Religious Ultra-Conservative

### Chances in the Elections



Currently holding the powerful position as Chief Justice of Iran, Raisi ran for the presidency in the last election in 2017, losing to moderate incumbent President Hassan Rouhani, 38.3% versus 57%. **However, as Rouhani has broken his social and economic promises over the last years, the majority of the moderates' supporters have become unwilling to participate in the June election, which provides a golden opportunity for Raisi.** Another factor that may help pave the way for his victory is that most, if not all, conservatives support him to become Iran's next president. The Guardian Council's selection of candidates demonstrates a clear willingness of the Islamic Republic's top leaders to pave the way for a Raisi presidency. There is no powerful rival for him and probably **other conservative candidates will refuse to compete with him, thus throwing their weight behind Raisi's candidacy.** Since the 1979 revolution, Raisi has been working in the judicial system of the Islamic Republic and has a deep affiliation with hardliners. He advocates Islamic law in society, such as the mandatory veiling (hijab) and agrees with restrictions on access to the internet, both of which are only supported by the hardliners' social base.

**Like most hardliners, Raisi sees the West as an enemy and believes normalization with the U.S. is not possible,** also echoing the belief that anti-Americanism will have to continue to play an indispensable role as the key pillar of the Islamic Republic. He casts doubts on the efficiency of the JCPOA and promotes the words of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, that Iran must be self-sufficient through investing in its domestic economic potential. In terms of regional policies, Raisi is a supporter of the "axis of resistance" through which Tehran supports Shia militias and the diffusion of Shia ideology across the region. He also has a strong relationship with the IRGC, whose high-ranking commanders applaud Raisi's performance as Chief Justice that is characterized by heightened repression. With his background and political position, most religious and

ideological followers of the Islamic Republic are likely to vote for him. Also, Raisi is notoriously feared as key actor in the history of repression under the Islamic Republic, namely during the Great Massacre in the late 1980s. Thus, **his presidency could be a nightmare for Iran's civil society and people's democratic aspirations.**

In terms of **economic policy**, two factors are important to note: Raisi has been the head of the immensely powerful and wealthy Astan-e Qods Razavi, a religious-commercial conglomerate in Iran's north-east that is a political-economic powerhouse for the hardliners. During the presidential debates with Rouhani four years ago, he advocated a kind of economic populism by stressing the socio-economic misery in the country and Rouhani's failure to address it, even saying that Iran had 16 million slum dwellers (or almost one-third of the urban population according to other official sources), the very same number of votes he finally received at the polls. Moreover, over the last few years, Raisi has been traded **as a potential successor of Supreme Leader Khamenei.** While a presidential run may forfeit his chance to become Supreme Leader over the next four years in case of Khamenei's demise, if elected president he could claim that the presidential victory had granted him enough popular legitimacy to put him on pole-position for the Supreme Leadership. It is against this backdrop that he publicly expressed some concern over the Guardian Council's selection of candidates that is de facto handing him the presidency, thus endangering his ambition to claim popular legitimacy post-election. Interestingly, the position in which Raisi is currently finding himself is similar to that of Khamenei when he wanted to the presidency in Oct. 1981: With no real rival, Khamenei obtained 95% of the votes. Among Raisi's current rivals, there are at least three of them who could resign from the race in exchange with a ministry in his administration.



# MOHSEN REZAEI

## Military Conservative

### Chances in the Elections



Rezaei is a conservative politician with a background in serving as commander-in-chief of the IRGC between 1980 to 1997. He started his political ambition in 1999 when he wanted to stand for parliament, which he failed. More importantly, Rezaei's persistent insistence to become Iran's president began in 2005 and continued to 2009, 2013, and now 2021.

He has made efforts to introduce himself as a politician with innovative ideas to build a strong economy. More recently, he has made very questionable statement regarding his solutions for economic improvement: "if tensions between Iran and the U.S. increase, we can take American soldiers hostage and make money by releasing them" – in fact, a current Iranian policy.

Today, Rezaei serves as Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council. He was close to one of the Islamic Republic's founding fathers, Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, in the 1990s and the 2000s, but after the 2009 post-election protests in which Rafsanjani drew closer to the reformists, Rezaei distanced himself.

Rezaei **congratulated** the Supreme Leader on the nuclear deal between Iran and the West in 2015 and criticized domestic opponents of the JCPOA. However, after the failure of the agreement, he tried to portray himself as an opponent of the JCPOA. Without a shadow of a doubt, Rezaei is a supporter of Iran's policy in the Middle East and the expansion of Tehran's footprint throughout the region. All in all, Rezaei will attempt to emulate the standpoints of the Supreme Leader and the IRGC in order to amass credit for himself.

Rezaei has been a loyal politician in regard to the Islamic Republic core principles. But lacking sufficient charisma, he has not been traded as a potential president by Iran's

top leaders. It is very probable that Rezaei will witness his fourth failure in presidential elections, as neither the Iranian people nor the Islamic Republic's centres of powers consider him a serious choice.



# AMIR-HOSSEIN GHAZIZADEH HASHEMI

## Fundamentalist

### Chances in the Elections



Ghazizadeh Hashemi is another current MP who desires to become president. He is not a well-known figure in Iran, and probably even many Iranians have never heard of him. He was a member of the Front of the Islamic Revolution Stability.

He has been a serious opponent of Rouhani administration policies, such as the JCPOA.

In these elections, Ghazizadeh Hashemi has said that he will compete till the end and has no intention to resign in favour of other candidates. Nevertheless, as he has no chance to win, thus it is not far-fetched to suggest that he will decide to change his position current standpoint as may eye a ministry in the Raisi administration.



# ABDOLNASER HEMMATI

## Independent

### Chances in the Elections



Although Hemmati is currently Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CB) in the Rouhani administration, it is difficult to categorize him as a member of either the hardline or moderate camps, hence the slogan he selected for his campaign: “The third voice.” Hemmati is certainly one of the Guardian Council’s surprises for the upcoming election, but to win the election he needs an unprecedented miracle.

For long, he has been an unknown politician to Iranians. When the price of the dollar skyrocketed in Iran at time when Hemmati headed the CBI, Iranians gradually came to know him.

As there is no serious rival for the hardliners, Hemmati may adopt the position of challenging them. His attempts to portray himself as someone knowledgeable on the economy is undermined by him being viewed by many to be part of those massive economic problems plaguing Iranians.



# SAEED JALILI

## Realist Conservative

Jalili is a hardliner politician who served as Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SCSC) from 2007 to 2013 during the Ahmadinejad administration. He was also Iran's chief nuclear negotiator before the Rouhani administration took office, considered by his Western counterparts to be too ideological. Jalili is known to be opposing any détente with the West. He is a member of the Front of the Islamic Revolution Stability (Jebhe-ye Paydari), the extreme end of the fundamentalist camp among Iranian hardliners. **He has been completely opposing the JCPOA**, instead believing that Iran should increase its nuclear capability to gain more benefits in negotiations with the West.

Jalili ran for the presidential election in 2013 but Rouhani defeated him by 18 million against 4 million votes. Jalili had a strong relationship with the late Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, an extremist cleric, which nurtured Jalili's conservative ideological standpoint towards cultural issues and **his insistence on propagating Islamic law in society**. He also advocates Iran's growing power in the Middle East and **has demanded** that **the U.S. should depart from the region**, adding "Iran and its regional allies have the power to defeat the U.S." Also, **Jalili is a supporter of the "pivot to the East"** in Iran's foreign policy, **claiming** that "The signing of a 25-year cooperative agreement between Iran and China could defeat the maximum pressure strategy of the U.S."

In terms of economic policies, Jalili has frequently emphasized Iran must not enact bills related to implement requirements from Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in terms of money laundering and terrorism financing, which could lay bare sensitive activities of Iran's "deep state". He has also suggested that Iran has the ability to bypass sanctions through barter trade. All in all, Jalili is unlikely to compete with Raisi, although he has enough credibility among hardliners. But Raisi is in the higher position, and it seems Jalili would be the next foreign minister under a Raisi administration.



OUT



# ALIREZA ZAKANI

## Fundamentalist

Zakani is a hardline politician who is currently an MP. Like Saeed Jalili, Zakani belongs to the Front of the Islamic Revolution Stability (Jebhe Paydari). Surprisingly, he was sentenced to one year in prison in 2017, although his sentence was reduced to a fine of 50 million rials (\$1,000 at that time). However, it has not prevented Zakani to receive the green light from the Guardian Council to run for president.

Zakani has a harsh view toward the JCPOA and any normalization of relations between Iran and the U.S. He, like nearly all Iranian politicians, regardless of hardliners or so-called moderates, also promotes Tehran's "axis of resistance" policy. Past experience suggests that he will probably resign in the last days before the election in exchange for a ministry from Raisi. This is because last year, as Zakani wanted to compete with Ghalibaf for the position of Speaker of Parliament, he in fact resigned ahead of the competition, and instead became the head of the Islamic Parliament Research Centre. It seems Zakani will have a chance to become Interior Minister under a Raisi administration.



OUT



# MOHSEN MEHRALIZADEH

## Reformist

Mehralizadeh, known as a politician who is part of the Islamic Republic's reformist establishment camp, served between 2001 and 2005 as Vice President of Iran and the head of the National Sports Organization of Iran under reformist President Mohammad Khatami.

However, the reformists do not take him seriously, for when the Guardian Council announced the list of candidates who can run for the presidency and Mehralizadeh was among them, the Reform Front issued a statement protesting the disqualification, saying it had no candidate to run for president. It appears that for Iran's top leadership, Mehralizadeh is merely a fig leaf that the reformists have a candidate for the election. Interestingly, in 2015 the Guardian Council disqualified him for the parliamentary elections, but has now allowed him in for the more important presidential elections.



OUT



# MOHAMMAD-BAGHER GHALIBAF

## Military Conservative

He is an **IRGC general** who has played an active role in the last two decades of Iranian politics and has the ambition to become president. Ghalibaf, the current Speaker of Iran's hardline-dominated parliament, ran for the presidency in 2005, 2013 and 2017, but with no success. Politicians who are close to Ghalibaf say **if Ebrahim Raisi does not register for the presidential election, Ghalibaf will be willing to be the candidate of conservatives**. Although Ghalibaf has made attempts to show he can be a perfect candidate for hardliners, the past presidential elections show the hardliners have not completely trusted him as they forced Ghalibaf to withdraw from the 2017 competition in favour of Raisi.

In 2005, the hardliners supported Ahmadinejad and in 2013 they preferred to support Saeid Jalili. The hardliners' suspicion is due to their general standpoint towards **Ghalibaf that he is a pragmatic politician with low ideological dependency**, at least in comparison with his conservative rivals in the former elections. However, he has tirelessly sought to grab the heart of hardliners, which resulted in his achievement in the last parliamentary election in 2020 when he topped the Tehran electoral outcome. It in this context that Ghalibaf repeats the words of hardliners against the West, particularly the U.S. **He is eager to promote his relationship with the late General Soleimani**, former commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, and his affiliation with the IRGC. He also advocates the "axis of resistance" policy and believes Iran must help militia groups such as Hezbollah and Houthis. However, Ghalibaf has not strong viewpoint against hijab or other cultural issues. Instead he likes to **promote himself as an adherent of economic development**, and he has been

criticized by hardliners for this rather non-ideological focus. This is believed to be the most important obstacle for hardliners to consider him as their final candidate.



OUT



# HOSSEIN DEHGHAN

## Military Conservative

He served as a commander in the Iranian Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) and in its air force. **He is known as a co-founder of Hezbollah in Lebanon** and has trained Lebanese fighters in the 1980s. He currently serves as an advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Although he has worked with both hardliners and moderates, it seems none of the two factions support Dehghan's ambition for the presidency and there is no considerable chance for him to win the election. Meanwhile, he attempts to introduce himself as a third solution, emphasizing that while moderates and hardliners have not been successful to satisfy the people, he, with his military background, can compensate for the failure of politicians. These days, he evades to take any stance on cultural issues that may sit uncomfortably with most of Iranian society, stresses that one could not become successful through harsh actions against "cultural threats". Yet, in 2018 he had said if a woman has a "bad Hijab", she must be punished.

In terms of relations with the U.S., Dehghan has said if he becomes the next Iran's president, he has two conditions for the relationship with the U.S.: **"First, the Americans should in no way interfere in Iran's internal affairs. Second, the U.S. must respect Iran's interests [in the Middle East] and spheres of influence."** As it turns out, he supports Iran's regional policy and it is worth explaining that Dehghan has a desire to enhance Tehran's relationship with Moscow, a willingness that was on display when he served as Defence Minister between 2013 and 2017.



OUT



# SAEED MOHAMMAD

## Military Conservative

He is another IRGC general who announced his ambition for the presidency. **While he is belonging to the hardliners, there is no strong signal that this faction will support Mohammad**, at least so far. Mohammad has recently been fired, where he worked as commander of IRGC Khatam-al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, a construction and engineering giant.

In fact, Mohammad announced that he resigned to focus on his goal for the presidency but Fars News, a news agency close to IRGC, interviewed General Yadollah, IRGC Political Deputy, who *stressed* that Mohammad has in fact been fired because of his activities in view of the presidential election. This interview has been interpreted in a way that the IRGC as a core centre of power is unlikely to support Mohammad, which leaves the latter with no significant chance to become the final candidate of hardliners.

As he is recognized as a newcomer in Iran's politics, there is no clear perspective regarding his standpoint towards cultural issues but he believes in "*the original values of the revolution*". Furthermore, he has no obvious comments on foreign policy but **his emphasis on "original values of the revolution"** and his background in the IRGC could suggest that he may oppose any de-escalation with the U.S. and continue to support Iran's interference in the Middle East. Since it seems that hardliners would not support him, Mohammad tries to build a different image to get the attraction of people. Mohammad's supporters propagate him as a young, adept and educated candidate that will serve Iranians, particularly the youth. In this vein, Mohammad has said: "*I have an international degree in management and I consider myself the best one who can manage society.*"



OUT



# ALI LARIJANI

## Moderate – Conservative

He is a conservative politician who was a military officer of the IRGC in the 1980s and reached the rank of Brigadier-General. He was appointed as head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting in the 1990s. He ran for the 2005 presidential election where he ranked sixth, winning 5.94% of the votes. However, Larijani is famous for 12 years' activity as a parliament speaker from 2008 to 2020. In these years, **Larijani's political tendencies have tended to the so-called moderate elite wing.**

He has strong relationships with President Rouhani and *Iranian dailies* predict that Rouhani is eager to see Larijani as his successor. Larijani has tried to brand himself as a **pragmatic**. Meanwhile, he has a close relationship with the Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. The latter appointed him as liaison officer with China, which resulted in the 25-year accord between Iran and China signed this year. Larijani is also a supporter of the "axis of resistance" and the rise of Iran's power in the Middle East. However, in 2019, *he said*: "With the Iranian-Saudi dialogue, the security and political problems of the region will be solved. We call for the establishment of a security regime in the Persian Gulf with the participation of all the countries bordering the Persian Gulf." As he is now introduced as a moderate politician and most Iranian who were supporters of the moderates won't participate in the upcoming elections, Larijani has little chance to win the election.

Meantime, **it is worth adding that Larijani is an influential politician among moderates and conservatives, but he has never been a popular person among Iranians**, particularly because Larijani has been neutral to the social and cultural concerns of most Iranians.



OUT



# JAVAD ZARIF

## Moderate

**In the reformist camp, there is no prominent potential candidates to run for the June election as of yet. The reformists believe the Guardian Council will veto all of their options.** One of the few potential candidates that the reformist camp will desire to have is the current foreign minister of Iran. Although Zarif had frequently said that he is not willing to run for the presidency, one of his more recent press comments indicates he may change his decision in the last days before the election. Historically, it has not been unusual for Iranian politicians to deny any intention to become a candidate, but they suddenly changed their decision and often justify their candidacy as a religious or moral duty. Zarif has a close relationship with reformists but he is backed by Ayatollah Khamenei, on display whenever hardliners attacked Zarif because of the JCPOA.

Although Zarif is known as a supporter of a détente policy, **he also has tried to improve his relationship with the IRGC.** In the last summer, Iran's foreign minister *said* he had weekly meetings with the late General Soleimani, former commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, and "we collaborate on issues with each other". Zarif, like other so-called moderates, is eager to demonstrate that he is an open-minded politician when dealing with many Iranians' cultural and social demands, such as on the issues of hijab and social freedoms. However, as Khatami (1997–2008) and Rouhani (2013–2021) demonstrated, "moderate" administrations avoid challenging the Islamic Republic on social and cultural grounds where they have rather conceded to what the hardliners want.



OUT



# OVERVIEW OVER MAIN POLICY STANDPOINTS BY CANDIDATE



<b>Policies</b>			
<b>Candidates</b>	<b>Détente policy with the West and particularly the US</b>	<b>Social Freedoms &amp; Religious Moderation</b>	<b>Regional Policy (axis of resistance)</b>
<b>Ebrahim Raisi</b> (Hardliner)	Opponent	Opponent	Proponent
<b>Mohammad- Bagher Ghalibaf</b> (Hardliner)	Opponent	Unpredictable	Proponent
<b>Hossein Dehghan</b> (Hardliner)	Unpredictable	Unpredictable	Proponent
<b>Saeed Jalili</b> (Hardliner)	Opponent	Opponent	Proponent
<b>Saeed Mohammad</b> (Hardliner)	Opponent	Unpredictable	Proponent
<b>Ali Larijani</b> (Moderate)	Neutral	Neutral	Proponent
<b>Javad Zarif</b> (Moderate)	Proponent	Proponent	Proponent





# AUTHOR

Dr. Ali Fathollah-Nejad (Ph.D. SOAS) is a German-Iranian political scientist with a focus on Iran, the Middle East, the post-unipolar world order, and right-wing populism in Europe. He is the author of the much-acclaimed *Iran in an Emerging New World Order: From Ahmadinejad to Rouhani* (Palgrave Macmillan's Studies in Iranian Politics, May 2021) and of the *Iran 1400 Brief: Beyond the Headlines* weekly newsletter (Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom's Middle East and North Africa program). Based in Berlin, he is a Non-Resident Senior Research Fellow at the Afro-Middle East Centre (AMEC), South Africa's think-tank specialized on the Middle East, as well as affiliated researcher with *Centre d'Études de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement (CECID)* at *Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)* as well as *Freie Universität (FU) Berlin's Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics*. In 2020, he published two monographs: *The*

*Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 Protests Amid a Triple Crisis* (Brookings Analysis Paper) and *The Politics of Culture in Times of Rapprochement: European Cultural and Academic Exchange with Iran (2015–16)* (Wissenschaftsverlag WeltTrends).

Ali holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Department of Development Studies at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) University of London and was a *post-doctoral Associate* with the Harvard Kennedy School's Iran Project. Also, he had been the in-house Iran expert at the Brookings Institution's Middle East center in Doha (BDC, 2017–20) and the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP, 2015–18).

He has taught globalization and development in the Middle East, contemporary Iran, the Arab Revolts and great-power politics at the University of Tübingen (as

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His about 200 analytical pieces in English, German, and French have been translated into a dozen languages. A frequent speaker at academic conferences and political forums, he regularly contributes to leading international media outlets in English, German, and French. Ali is fluent in German, French, English, and Persian, and reads Dutch.

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اتحاد جماهیر شوروی

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ترکیه

CASPIAN SEA

دریای مازندران

عراق

TEHRAN

**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
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Middle East and North Africa

نمایش علامات

LEGEND

1. SOIL WITH NO OR SLIGHT LIMITATIONS  
1. No important problem except locally
2. SOIL WITH SLIGHT TO MODERATE LIMITATIONS  
2. Limitations due to moderate deficit of water and undulating relief
3. SOILS WITH MODERATE TO SEVERE LIMITATIONS  
3. Limitations due to moderate to strong deficit of water or shallow depth
4. SOILS WITH SEVERE TO VERY SEVERE LIMITATIONS  
4. Limitations due to dissected relief, shallow depth and severe deficit of water
5. SOILS WITH ALMOST NO POTENTIALITY  
5. Sand dunes
5. Solonchaks, salt marshes, saliferous and gypsiferous marls

دریاچه Lake  
SCALE 1: 2,500,000

عربستان سعودی  
SAUDI ARABIA

PREPARED BY M. L. DEWAN AND J. FAMOURI  
THE WORLD SOIL RESOURCES OFFICE  
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