

# IRAN 1400 BRIEF

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BEYOND THE HEADLINES

ایران



FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
STIFTUNG Für die Freiheit.  
Middle East and North Africa

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# SUMMARY

The Guardian Council's vetting of candidates for the Iran presidential elections has seen the disqualification of Ali Larijani, the main rival of Ebrahim Raisi. Hence, there is little doubt that the latter with much support from hardliners will be winning the 18 June elections, amid widespread voter apathy and calls for boycott from politicians formerly an accepted part of the ruling establishment. Meanwhile, the economy has been a focal point of the presidential campaigns, but there are no signs of realistic proposals that would help much-needed economic recovery. Moreover, the Vienna talks over the revival of the JCPOA have, according to the Iranian delegation, reached a critical juncture in which further progress hinges upon consultations of the parties involved with their respective capitals in the next few days.

# DOMESTIC POLITICS

On 25 May, Iran's Interior Ministry announced the names allowed to run for the 18 June presidential elections, which were vetted by the ultra-conservative Guardian Council: Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, Abdolnasser Hemmati, Saeed Jalili, Mohsen Mehralizadeh, Ebrahim Raisi, Mohsen Rezaee and Alireza Zakani. As in previous elections, the Guardian Council also disqualified all 40 women who had registered to run for the presidency – according to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic the President must be male and of Shia faith. Raisi, who has served as Chief Justice for the past two years, is a close confidant of Supreme Leader Khamenei, who is also traded as his potential successor.

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Raisi is also referred to as “blood judge” because of him being part of Ayatollah Khomeini’s infamous four-man death committee that was implicated in the mass executions against thousands of political prisoners in the summer of 1988. Against this background, it is feared that a Raisi presidency may be turning into a nightmare for Iranian civil society, which has also not fared well under the “moderate” Rouhani administration despite claims to the contrary. Raisi is on the sanctions list of both the U.S. and the EU.

As a result, Raisi remains by far the top contender for the presidency, since his main rival Ali Larijani has been disqualified. Larijani’s disqualification may be a combination of (a) the hardline élite’s sense of hubris given the historical weakness of their domestic rivals, i.e. the reformist or moderate camp; (b) a fear that Larijani’s very recent media and social-media offensive (including on the audio platform Clubhouse), in which he mimicked some of the promises made

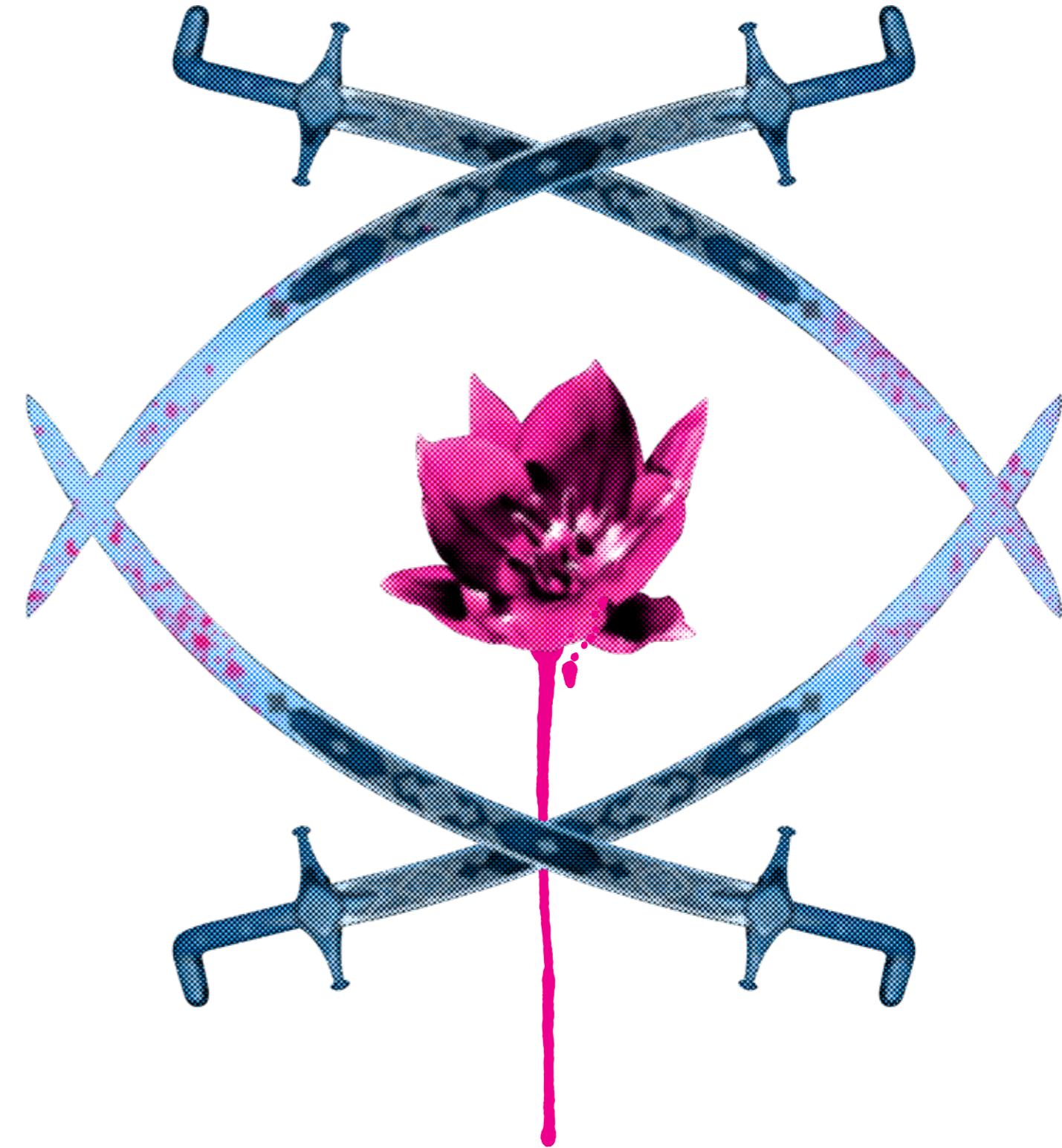
by the Rouhani campaigns in the past, may reverse voter apathy, mobilizing disenchanted Iranians to take to the polls to vote in order to vote for him as a “lesser evil” against Raisi – a routine scenario in many Iranian elections in the past few decades (although this concern may have been exaggerated or a result of paranoia, given the fact that Ali Larijani is not very popular among Iranians as he may be seen a guarantor for the status quo rather than a reformer); (c) a result of past élite infighting between powerful establishment clans: Besides Ali, the Larijani brothers include most importantly Mohammad-Javad and Sadegh. The latter, who serves as chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council – a body that was originally set up to resolve differences between the Parliament and the Guardian Council – openly blasted the decision of the Guardian Council, of which he himself is a member, to disqualify his brother Ali. This is indicative of the schism that has emerged among Iran’s establishment as the Guardian Council decisions has led to a [shrinking of the élite’s inner circle](#); and (d) his daughter living in the U.S., which has been quite recently introduced as a hurdle for Iranian presidential candidates from running.

However, Ali Larijani’s disqualification is also quite surprising given (a) his record as long-standing senior figures of the Islamic Republic, serving *inter alia* as Speaker of Parliament and diplomat (including chief nuclear negotiator) and (b) the good ties he seemed to enjoy with Supreme Leader Khamenei, for it was him and, for instance, not President Rouhani who prepared the controversial 25-year accord with China. Yet, it seems that for Tehran’s hardliners, his mixed political character between a hardliner and a reformist, whose views on domestic and foreign affairs are close to Rouhani’s, was too much of a risk to take in the bid to help elect their favorite Raisi.

Another key candidate is disqualified is Mostafa Tajzadeh, the reformist camp’s most prominent candidate, who in his campaign was calling for the IRGC to “return to the barracks”, i.e. to limit its role to defense rather than being heavily involved in commercial matters, and for limiting the also totalitarian powers of the Supreme Leader.

Interestingly, the Guardian Council’s more-than-expected disqualifications led also Raisi to protest, publicly asking the Guardian Council to reconsider some of the disqualifications – in an apparent fear that as things stand now he will be seen as a pre-selected candidate and therefore cannot claim popular legitimacy as Iran’s next president – an important prerequisite towards realizing his ambition to become the next Supreme Leader after Khamenei’s demise. However, this and other calls – also on Khamenei to order an executive directive to reinstate disqualified candidates by the Guardian Council – were finally rejected by Khamenei.

Moreover, also former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been disqualified as in the past round. Since his second term as president, he had fallen out with his erstwhile backer Khamenei, and ever since pursues his own brand of political ideology where nationalism overshadows Islamism and is engaged in a campaign of rebranding himself, away from a radical ideologue to even a non-ideological “liberal democrat” as he has portrayed himself in an interview with a leading Iranian intellectual magazine. Ahmadinejad is still very much detested by Iran’s middle class who had taken to the streets after the 2009 presidential race that was believed to have been rigged to his favour, in what became known as the Green Movement. However, among Iran’s lower classes he is still quite popular as his monthly cash payments to Iranian houseless during his presidency had ameliorated their economic situation. In case of the Guardian Council again disqualifying him from running, Ahmadinejad had already pledged that he will not grant his support to any other candidate. Now, after being disqualified, he has joined the call for boycotting the elections. In a nutshell, albeit presidential elections in the Islamic Republic have always been heavily engineered “from above”, this time around a kind of Syrianization can be witnessed as everyone is expecting a clear Raisi victory amid the lack of any competition as most other qualified contenders are likely to throw their weight behind his candidacy and instead only seek positions in a future Raisi administration.



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# ECONOMY

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The head of the Central Bank of Iran Abdolnaser Hemmati, who has been qualified to run by the Guardian Council, in a television interview promised to create one million new jobs in his first year in office, even as he oversaw one of the steepest declines in Iran’s economy. On his part, Mohsen Rezaee, a former IRGC commander and a regular presidential contender, promised a five-fold increase in monthly cash subsidies, a scheme that would almost certainly exacerbate inflation. He also said that Iran’s currency, one of the world’s cheapest currencies, will be the most powerful in the Middle East after the US dollar and Euro under his presidency! Seid Jalili has said: “We must counteract the economic leverages of our enemies by economic resistance”. Raisi also has focused on the economy and had a meeting with private sector economic actors. He promised to improve Iran’s economy by investing in private sectors.

It is an indisputable fact that Iran’s economy has significantly suffered from Trump’s “maximum pressure” sanctions, which exacerbated widespread dissatisfaction among Iranians toward their leadership. Against this backdrop, all presidential candidates have raised economic issues during their campaign. However, the proffered suggestions seem impractical as they sideline the crucial role the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy and its enmity with the West, particularly the U.S., has played in sustaining and deepening the country’s economic woes. Last week, Farshad Momeni, a

prominent economist and professor at Tehran’s Allameh Tabataba’i University, described what candidates propagate as a roadmap for rescuing the economy is precisely what led the economy to collapse in the first place. Eight years ago, President Rouhani promised to bring prosperity to Iranians, instead a six-fold rise of the dollar against the national currency as well as high inflation rates were witnessed. The most central problem regarding economic recovery remains the misguided belief by the Islamic Republic’s officials that their political ambitions (domestically and in foreign affairs) can be separated from the economy, or in other words that the latter can be shielded against the former.



# INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



After weeks of negotiations in Vienna on the revival of the JCPOA, it seems a critical juncture has been reached, at least for the Iranian side. Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has said [progress has been made](#) so far but now major issues of dispute have been identified. He raised doubts that the current round of talks will see a breakthrough, while stating it may be necessary for all delegations to return to their respective capitals for consultations. He also added that good meetings have taken place between Iran on one hand and Russia and China on the other, as well as consultations with the European parties to the JCPOA, while working group meetings have continued.

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Araqchi's description of the state of affairs signals that there are serious hurdles between the main antagonists, Iran and the U.S. This may concern (a) the question of sequencing within the intended compliance-versus-compliance mechanism meant to bring both sides back into compliance with their obligations with the deal,

i.e. Tehran reversing its reduction of nuclear commitments under the deal and Washington removing the sanctions Trump had re-imposed. Both sides, at least publicly, have urged the other side to take the first step. Meanwhile, it is normal for delegations to seek consultations with their government's during these kind of Iran nuclear negotiations. This is especially true for the Iranian delegation from the Foreign Ministry, as the main decision-makers in Tehran is the Supreme Leader. Also, it is not clear whether in addition the mentioned disputes concern any Western demands on non-nuclear issues, i.e. Iran's regional policies and ballistic missile programme, which Tehran has consistently said is non-negotiable – but it may end up have to offer concessions if the U.S. side won't be willing to grant Iran the sanctions relief it urgently needs to allow much-needed economic recovery. Moreover, despite much speculation, a breakthrough in Vienna before the 18 June elections may not be probable, which can be an asset for Iran's hardliners who are poised to take over the presidency and who hope to see the benefits of a JCPOA revival reaped under their rule.

However, [Tasnim](#), an IURGC-affiliated news agency, has written that "our correspondent reported from informed sources that what is currently going on in Vienna is essentially far from a good deal for the Iranian people." It also

suggested that Araqchi may be an agent of one political faction, i.e. that of the reformists and "moderates."

Since the start of the Vienna talks, President Rouhani has frequently said that the revival of the JCPOA, including the lifting of sanctions, was within reach. Last week, he then [claimed](#) that the U.S. had agreed to lift all major sanctions. However, rather than a realistic assessment of the negotiations process, Rouhani's overtly optimistic statements are reflective of his desire to see the revival the JCPOA – his main political project now in shatters – before mid-August when he must leave power. However, while the eagerness of the Biden administration to rejoin the deal has emboldened Iranian officials. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has recently [said](#): "And what we haven't yet seen is whether Iran is ready and willing to make a decision to do what it has to do."

# SOCIETAL

Voter apathy remains a constant feature in the run-up to the election, paving the way for the repeat of last year's voter turnout fiasco for the parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, calls for boycotts are gaining steam.

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According to a 28 May poll conducted by ISPA (seen as the most reliable polling agency in Iran), almost half of respondents (47%) say they "don't know" whom to vote for, while almost 44% said they will vote for Raisi. (Traditionally, supporters of regime hardliners are usually keen on heeding their candidates' call to take to the ballot box, while the reformists' ability to mobilize their own supporters has tremendously been undermined by their severe decline in popular legitimacy over the Rouhani years). Besides, voting intentions for the other candidates remains well under 4%. On the before, an ISPA poll predicted a voter turnout of 36–37%, a dramatic decline from the previous election



where it stood at double that rate 73.3%. The lowest ever turnout was in 1993 with 51%, when President Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani got re-elected. The highest was in 2009 with 85%, when President Ahmadinejad was re-elected. Meanwhile, the past two presidential elections witnessed a turnout of more than 70%.

Yet, these figures need to be taken with a grain of salt, as voter turnout is not seldom engineered by Iranian authorities in the effort to signal, especially to the outside world, that a high turnout is a confirmation for the popular legitimacy of the system. It seems that this time around, these kinds of concerns have been shelved for hardliners' thirst for monopolizing power in all branches of governments.

Moreover, the boycott campaign, which has been supported by Iranians outside and inside the country, has gained steam. Tajzadeh, the barred reformist, blasted the Guardian Council's decision as turning elections into "appointments by the Leader." Also, the [Reformist Front](#) – a core assembly of reformist politicians – has now joined the call for boycotting the elections.



# 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

Senior Lecturer in Middle East and Comparative Politics), in the Ph.D. program of Qatar University's Gulf Studies Center, at FU Berlin's Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics, the University of Westminster, SOAS etc. Due to COVID-19, his Visiting Professorship at the Centre for International Studies of the University of Economics in Prague is postponed.

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 شوری

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## FRIEDRICH NAUMANN STIFTUNG Für die Freiheit.

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
  - 2. Limitation due to poor or moderate drainage
- 3. SOILS WITH MODERATE TO SEVERE LIMITATIONS
  - 3. Limitations due to moderate to strong deficit of water or shallow depth
  - 3. Limitations due to dissected relief and/or shallow depth
  - 3. Limitations due to dissected relief, shallow depth and moderate deficit of water
- 4. SOILS WITH SEVERE TO VERY SEVERE LIMITATIONS
  - 4. Limitations due to dissected relief, shallow depth and severe deficit of water
  - 4. Limitations due to salinity, stoniness, shallow depth and severe deficit of water
- 5. SOILS WITH ALMOST NO POTENTIALITY
  - 5. Sand dunes
  - 5. Solonchaks, salt marshes, soliferous and gypsiferous marls

دراجه

Lake

SCALE 1: 2,500,000

PREPARED BY M.L.DEWAN AND J.FAMOURI

THE WORLD SOIL RESOURCES OFFICE  
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