

IRAN

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ایران



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SUMMARY



This week, President Raisi took the first step toward forming his cabinet by proposing a list of ministers to the Parliament. There is no surprise in this list as all the proposed ministers have a close relationship with the Supreme Leader and IRGC and hail from the Islamic Republic's security and intelligence apparatus. Therefore, it is expected that nearly all of them will be endorsed by the hardline-dominated Parliament. Internationally, the expansion of Taliban control throughout Afghanistan has stirred discussions across Iran's state-controlled media and among officials, who tend to construct a positive view about the Taliban's return to power amid a redefinition of bilateral ties as they welcome the withdrawal of U.S. troops from neighboring Afghanistan. Socially, the failure of the vaccination program has come to light in Iran with only 18 million doses injected but the country experiences officially more than 500 deaths per day these days, with the real number being much higher. Iran is probably the only country in the world that engaged in the fight against COVID-19 through a narrow-minded politico-ideological lens, as Supreme Leader Khamenei banned the import of U.S. and UK vaccines.

PRESIDENT RAISI PROPOSES A LIST OF CABINET MEMBERS

Iran's new President Ebrahim Raisi [released](#) a list of proposed cabinet ministers, all of whom have close ties with the IRGC and the Supreme Leader, above all Hossein Amir-Abdollahian for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Gen. Ahmad Vahidi for the Ministry of the Interior. During the two upcoming weeks, the hardline-dominated Parliament is tasked with assessing the qualification and competence of the proposed ministers in respective parliamentary committees, before endorsing them. Earlier, on August 3, Supreme Leader Khamenei [urged](#) Raisi and the Parliament to form a new administration as soon as possible due to the "current condition of the country," which is marked by multiple crises of vital significance.

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Raisi's proposed list of ministers did not bring any surprise for domestic and international observers. What was clear was the affiliation of the new president with the Islamic Republic's centers of power, namely the Supreme Leader and the IRGC, and more generally the country's security and intelligence apparatus. Moreover, the list demonstrated that the hardline camp in fact does trust a few politicians who also served in the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad administration. For instance, Raisi's proposed Oil Minister Javad Owji was Deputy Oil Minister under Ahmadinejad and has also worked with the notorious Mostazafan Foundation, the country's second-largest economy entity after the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). One of his populist ideas as Deputy Oil Minister was laying an "Islamic Pipeline," a sort of pan-Islamic oil pipeline project. Moreover, the proposed new Minister of the Interior is IRGC General Ahmad Vahidi, one of the founders of the Ministry of Intelligence and a former IRGC Qods Force Commander, who has been indicted by Argentine justice for the bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) in Buenos Aires in 1994, when 85 people were killed and hundreds injured. Vahidi also served as Defence Minister during the presidency of Ahmadinejad. President Ahmadinejad's Oil Minister Rostam Ghasemi who is known for his involvement in major corruption cases has been proposed as Raisi's Roads and Transportation Minister. Ghasemi is another military officer in the cabinet of the new president and served as the economic deputy of the IRGC's Qods Force in the last two years.

Raisi's candidate for Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, is a well-known supporter of the so-called "axis of resistance" in the Islamic Republic's **AAAA**

foreign policy, and has been referred to as the IRGC's "soft face." While under Rouhani's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the IRGC not seldom clashed over foreign policy, especially regional policies, under a Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian these two bodies will increase their cooperation and coordination, particularly in Middle East policies.

Meanwhile, it should not be forgotten that Tehran needs the revival of the nuclear deal and the new foreign minister will accordingly pursue this regime aim. Against this backdrop, during the inauguration of President Raisi, Amir-Abdollahian had held a two-hour meeting with the EU's representative Enrique Mora, assuring him that Iran will return to the negotiations over the nuclear deal JCPOA. In terms of public diplomacy, the Islamic Republic is likely to propagate the new foreign minister in particular, and the new administration, in general, is going to push for more concessions from the West, as an Iranian nuclear negotiator who asked not to be named told Reuters: "Amirabdollahian is a hardline diplomat. [...] If the foreign ministry remains in charge of Iran's nuclear dossier, then obviously Tehran will adopt a very tough line in the talks." In fact, so far it has been suggested that the nuclear dossier and as such the nuclear negotiations will be handed from the MFO to the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). The latter's Secretary Ali Shamkhani has reportedly been lobbying toward such an end. However, there is a chance that the MFA will keep that purview, as the IRGC – who is in control of Iran's nuclear project –

is likely to be very much content with a Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian taking over this charge within the MFA.

In fact, since the victory of Joe Biden in the U.S. presidential election in November 2020, the Islamic Republic's calculation has been that the best time has come for Tehran to take advantage of the West's eagerness to revive the JCPOA. To this end, the Iranian authorities believe that they must follow a tough line and even intensify tensions in order to compel the U.S. into rejoining the deal and lifting all sanctions. In conclusion, while Iran's hardliners are promoting the idea that the new administration will build a "new Iran", most proposed ministers have a legacy of serving in the Ahmadinejad administration, the IRGC, and the Judiciary. Therefore, we cannot expect a major shift in Iran's domestic and foreign policies and strategies, while President Raisi is very much expected to obey the orders of the centres of power, and as such not that different with his predecessors.

IRAN'S HARDLINE MEDIA ENGAGED IN REBRANDING THE TALIBAN

With the decision of President Biden to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, the re-emergence of the Taliban across all provinces of Afghanistan has been dramatically accelerated. So far, the Taliban have reportedly taken over half of the country's 34 provinces. This week, the Taliban seized Herat, the third-largest province in the country, which has a border with Iran. In this vein, "Considering (the) Taliban's dominance over the city of Herat, we draw their serious attention to ensuring the complete safety and health of diplomats and diplomatic facilities", Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh [said](#) on Twitter. Meanwhile, Rasoul Mousavi, Director-General for West Asia at the MFA, tellingly refrained from using the label of "Taliban" when tweeting "The administration of Herat has been taken over by the forces of the Islamic Emirate [i.e. the name that the Taliban have chosen for themselves—the author]. The consul general, diplomats, and staff [...] are inside the building. I am in regular contact with them. Meanwhile, a new wave of refugees from Afghanistan has reached Iran's border.

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Afghanistan is not just a geographical neighbour of Iran, as the two sides also share a common history and language. Amid the Taliban's advances over the last few weeks, many Iranians have expressed their solidarity with the people of Afghanistan on social media. Meanwhile, for Iranian officials, the story is different as Tehran has engaged in building a new relationship with the Taliban. Two decades ago, tensions between the two sides almost led to a military confrontation, after the Taliban had killed Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan in 1998. For long, it was assumed that the two sides will be eternal enemies, given their clashing religious fundamentalist ideologies: A "Shia" Islamic Republic versus a "Sunni" Taliban. Now, with the re-definition of Iranian—

Taliban ties, for instance, in December 2020, Ahmad Naderi, an Iranian MP, granted legitimacy for the Taliban by calling them one of the original (*asil*) movements in the region with their Pashtun ethnic background, [saying](#): “Cooperation [of Iran] with the Taliban can lead to the spread of stability in Afghan society and prevent the infiltration of groups such as ISIS.” *Javan*, a daily affiliated with the IRGC, published a piece with the title of “[Taliban: we are reformed](#)” that drew a positive picture of the Taliban by suggesting that the latter had reformed themselves. Furthermore, *Mashregh News*, close to Tehran’s security and intelligence apparatus, published an interview with Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid in which the latter [stressed](#): “Our relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran will be fraternal. We want neighboring countries to have friendly relations with each other.” In this vein, a month ago, negotiations between Iran and the Taliban took place in Tehran, led by Rouhani’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

Meantime, regarding Iran’s Taliban policy, some experts believe that the new conditions in Taliban-dominated Afghanistan provide an opportunity for Tehran to boost its influence in Afghanistan. One of the aims could be Iran carving out zones of influence thereby using the Fatemiyoun Brigade (an Afghan-dominated paramilitary force assembled by Tehran to fight in Syria to defend the Assad regime) and a Hezbollah-like Shia proxy groups.

Overall, these developments have made clear that Tehran prefers to have the Taliban ruling in its immediate neighborhood instead of the presence of U.S. troops there that has been seen as a potential threat against the Islamic Republic. Also, this provides Tehran with the opportunity to project the narrative that the U.S. has been defeated in Afghanistan, which is why Washington cannot bring prosperity to other nations.

#SOSIRAN: WORST COVID-19 CRISIS SO FAR

Iran currently experiences the worst COVID-19 crisis since the start of the pandemic, due to the massive spread of the Delta variant. This fifth wave of the pandemic is currently leading to officially more than 500 deaths per day (with estimates of the real figure as high as four times that number) and with about 40,000 new cases only recorded this week. Back in October 2020, Iraj Harirchi, the Deputy Minister of Health and Medical Education, had [stated](#) the real rate of deaths is twice the official rate.

The capacity of hospitals in Mashhad and Tehran (the country’s two largest cities) has been fully reached, with patients hospitalized in the corridors. “The situation we are facing is beyond disastrous”, [said](#) Dr. Mahdiar Saeedian, a physician in Mashhad, adding that “The health care system is on the verge of collapse.”

Meanwhile, IRGC commander Gen. Hossein Salami [demanded](#) that the Guards form COVID-19 taskforces and “go house to house and stop people from moving as much as possible”, calling it “a great jihad [...] to smash the virus.” Meanwhile, Alireza Zali, the head of Tehran’s anti-coronavirus headquarters, [told](#) reporters on 11 August that “They [Iranian officials] did not allow the purchase of vaccines because they thought they were expensive.” He also said that Iran “hid” its true coronavirus death toll from

the World Health Organization (WHO): “When experts from the WHO came to Iran, instead of consulting with them, we constantly asked them to praise the Iranian health system in the media.” However, after his remarks were widely circulated, he [claimed](#) that the meeting with reporters was based on an informal discussion and the reporters should not have published his remarks. Meanwhile, President Raisi [claimed](#) that “The administration has mobilized all its resources for [the fight against] COVID-19.”

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Unlike many countries that focused on buying tested vaccines, the Islamic Republic invested much time and energy into propagating over half a dozen “Made in Iran” vaccines, which has [aaaaa](#)

proved ineffective. Now, it has become clear this politico-ideological approach has miserably failed. Many Iranians have thus blamed the Supreme Leader who in January didn’t allow the administration to import Western-made vaccines. In other words, Tehran has turned the vaccine into a political issue, dividing the world into “East” and “West”, with Iran focusing on Russian and Chinese vaccines. However, health officials have said that Chinese and Russian companies have failed to meet their commitments to deliver the Sinopharm and Sputnik vaccines. While Iran had announced it had signed an agreement with Russia to import 60 million doses of vaccines, Moscow has so far only provided about two million doses for Iran. In contrast, Tehran has received about three million doses that were donated by Japan – a country that is considered to be part of the Western bloc.

Due to the dramatic shortage of vaccines, Iranian users on social media criticized the decisions of their officials. Users have posted tweets, photos, and videos to document the dismal situation in hospitals across the country, [using the hashtag #SOSIran](#). With the latter online campaign, Iranians ask the international community to pay attention to the situation in their country and push the Islamic Republic to reverse its ban on importing U.S. and UK vaccines. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former president who has come to play the role of the opposition, [said](#) that officials had obtained their vaccine from banned brands such as the U.S. firm Pfizer – a claim that many Iranians had assumed to be the case for quite some time now.

While the Raisi administration has promised to import 120 million doses over the next three months, the new Vice-President Mohammad Mokhbar has been the head of one of the “made in Iran” vaccine project just before last week and Raisi’s nominee for the Ministry of Health and Medical Education [had been](#) one of the signatories of a letter to Rouhani in January that urged the latter’s administration not to import vaccines from the West.

In conclusion, the tragedy of Iran’s handling of the deadly pandemic continues unabated, with serious public health and economic costs, while the mistrust between society and the state has been firmly cemented.

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AUTHOR

DR. ALI FATHOLLAH-NEJAD is the Author of the much-acclaimed upcoming Iran in an Emerging New World Order: From Ahmadinejad to Rouhani ▪ Affiliated researcher with: Afro–Middle East Centre (AMEC, Johannesburg) | Freie Universität (FU) Berlin's Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics | Centre d'Etudes de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement (CECID) at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) ▪ Former Iran expert of the Brookings Institution in Doha (BDC) & the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) ▪ Ph.D. in International Relations and Development Studies from SOAS, U of London

<https://www.fathollah-nejad.eu/>



You cannot reply to this email. For more information, contact yara.asmar@freiheit.org

Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, NauHaus, Mu'ath Bin Jabal St. 55, Jabal Amman

P.O. Box 2854, Amman 11181, Jordan, +962-655-32-999

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