

IRAN

1400 BRIEF

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ایران



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
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SUMMARY



This week, the Parliament endorsed most of President Raisi's nominees for cabinet ministers, leading to the new administration being officially formed. According to the Speaker of Parliament, the key ministerial positions have already been approved by the Supreme Leader. Internationally, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Iran's new foreign minister, visited Iraq to attend an international summit, where he blamed the U.S. as the main cause of insecurity in the Middle East. The Baghdad Summit also suggested that recent secret negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have likely been unsuccessful, at least so far. Economically, Iran reached a new record regarding the inflation rate, which now stands at officially 45%. Meanwhile, President Raisi appointed Mohsen Rezaee, former commander-in-chief of the IRGC, as Vice President in Economic Affairs, someone who has little qualifications in economic affairs but is only likely to boost the IRGC's already massive economic footprint. In terms of security, Tehran faces a new potential major liability as an Iranian group hacked the security cameras of the country's notorious Evin prison, which showed multiple abuses against inmates.

PARLIAMENT APPROVES RAISI CABINET

This week, Iran's Parliament approved almost all of President Ebrahim Raisi's nominees for his administration, most importantly Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, a diplomat close to the IRGC's Qods Force, as Foreign Minister and Ahmad Vahidi, an IRGC Qods Force commander as Interior Minister. Meanwhile, Parliament Speaker Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf said that key ministers have already received the approval of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. President Raisi has announced in his first cabinet meeting that the government's priorities would be fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and easing economic hardship for Iranians. The president and his cabinet also had a meeting with the Supreme Leader, where Khamenei told them that people's trust in the government has been reduced and the new administration ought to alleviate this problem through its performance. He also stressed that Iran's economy must not interweave with the nuclear negotiations and President Raisi should assume that the sanctions will not be lifted by the U.S. The Supreme Leader added that the Biden administration's demands would be the same as Trump's.

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The Parliament's endorsement of the proposed cabinet-member list of the new administration (except for the nominee for Minister of Education) is no surprise, given that both institutions are controlled by regime hardliners. Indeed, the most crucial common denominator between the administration and the parliament is that many members of both institutions have a close relationship with the IRGC as well as the Supreme Leader's Office (*Beyt*). Among Raisi's nominees, those for the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Interior are key. For the Islamic Republic has encountered unprecedented security threats over the last three years, both internal (namely the two nationwide protests in 2018 and 2019) and external (i.e. Trump's "maximum_pressure" sanctions). It seems the Iranian authorities will not be able to find meaningful solutions in regard to facing these ongoing domestic and international threats. Instead, the appointment of Gen. Vahidi as Interior Minister demonstrates that Tehran is likely to even more heavily rely on suppression at home. For instance, there is speculation that Vahidi will appoint Gen. Mohammad-Reza Naqdi, who was appointed by Khamenei as

[Coordinating Deputy to the IRGC's Commander in May 2019](#), as Governor of the restive oil-rich Khuzestan province, a hotbed of civil unrest, most recently over the last weeks driven by a chronic water supply crisis and power outages. [Nagdi](#) has a long record in cracking down on domestic dissent, since e.g. the 1999 student uprising and the 2009 Green Movement, with the U.S. imposing sanctions on him later in 2011.

Externally, after the Rouhani administration had banked all its capital on the now-defunct nuclear deal and failed to meet its campaign promises made to Iranians, the appearance of Amir-Abdollahian as Iran's new foreign minister is a signal to the world that Tehran will more readily shift its foreign policy preferences onto the "axis of resistance" in the Middle East and a "look to the East" extra-regional geopolitical orientation. In this vein, the new foreign minister [tweeted](#) that "My honor to be confirmed by the parliament to represent the great nation of #Iran in the arena of foreign policy & int'l relations. Determined to follow balanced, active, & smart diplomacy based on principles of dignity, wisdom, & prudence. Neighbors & Asia #1 priority."

As a result, it appears that the first priority of the new administration will be to contain the above-mentioned domestic and international threats. Domestically, Tehran is likely to focus on thwarting protests by all means necessary, while internationally it will invest much time and energy to counter Western pressure by drawing closer to non-Western great-powers such as China and Russia and through its proxies in the Middle East. However, it is questionable whether such an approach will yield the desired results. As a former MP said in an interview with the [news site Bahar](#), "the Raisi administration entertains dreams without a practical roadmap" for achieving its stated goals, which may end up creating new challenges. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic continues to face an acute "triple crisis" (socio-economic, political and ecological), which are threatening its very stability and survival. On all fronts, there is no indication that a Raisi presidency will be able to effectively contain, let alone provide solutions for these immense challenges.

NEW FOREIGN MINISTER AMIR-ABDOLLAHIAN AT BAGHDAD SUMMIT

In his first trip as Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian participated in a regional conference hosted by Iraq aimed at easing tensions in the Middle East. During the high-level Baghdad Summit for Cooperation and Partnership, he [claimed](#) that "the Islamic Republic of Iran has always emphasized the achievement of peace through dialogue and negotiation within the region." Iran's foreign minister also blamed the U.S. to constitute the main cause of insecurity, saying that this was clearly visible in many countries of the region. Among the conference participants were Saudi-Arabia's foreign minister, the King of Jordan, the Emir of Qatar, Egypt's and France's presidents,

Turkey's foreign minister, GCC Council Secretary-General Nayef Al-Hajraf, UAE Vice-President and Dubai ruler Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum and Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit. *Tasnim*, a news agency close to the IRGC, commented that Syria was the most important absentee from the summit, blaming France for this omission. *Tasnim* then added that Paris would be dreaming of succeeding the U.S. role in the Middle East, after the “defeat” of Washington in Afghanistan and a possible withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

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The Baghdad Summit comes at a crucial moment, especially shortly after the U.S. fiasco in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Middle East's multiple crises continue, among them civil wars, terrorism, failed states and tremendous gaps between societies and their respective regimes. Also, there are power rivalries on the regional and global levels. The Saudi–Iranian conflict is still one of the defining rivalries in West Asia, in which both sides blame each other for perpetuating instability, even though some senior Iranian officials continue to claim that Tehran is ready to bring about a positive change in its tormented ties with Riyadh. Over the last months, the two countries have had several rounds of secret negotiations, but Baghdad Summit demonstrated that there is still no significant progress on that front. In fact, when Iraqi officials planned for a group photo of participants, the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers should have stood next to each other, but Amir- Abdollahian sparked a widespread controversy because he ended standing somewhere else, thus violating the protocol. *Hamshahri*, a conservative daily, interpreted Amir-Abdollahian's move as a sign of protest against his planned spot during the photo op. Regardless of the severity of this move, the very fact that Iran's new foreign minister has even refused to stand next to his Saudi counterpart illustrates that the two countries may still be far away from a normalization of their ties.

Instead, Iran's new foreign minister has stressed time and again his stalwart support of Tehran's “axis of resistance” policy, which is the most important disagreement between Tehran and Riyadh. In such a situation, there is little hope that the summit in Baghdad or for that matter similar ones will yield any substantive change on that bilateral front. Thus, it is likely that tensions will remain high, as the Raisi administration has vowed to see the support of Iran's regional proxies as a high priority in foreign policy. This development is sustained by the fact, as e.g. the leading reformist daily *Shargh* has pointed out, that while Iran's former foreign minister Mohammad-Javad Zarif had found himself in an uneasy relationship with the IRGC's Qods Force that is basically in control of Tehran's regional policies, his successor Amir-Abdollahian will definitely support and implement policies preferred by the Qods Force. On this account, the streamlining of

Iran's regional policies between the Foreign Ministry and the IRGC will help alleviate any confusion or illusion from neighboring countries, especially Saudi Arabia, about the direction of Iranian policies in the region.

INFLATION RATE OFFICIALLY AT 45% & MOHSEN REZAEI APPOINTED AS VP FOR ECONOMIC AFFAIR



This week, the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) has [announced](#) that the inflation rate in the Iranian month of Mordâd (mid-July to mid-August) has reached 45%, and even 55% for food, beverages and tobacco. Meanwhile, Iran's currency has lost another 15% of its value against the U.S. dollar in the last three weeks, i.e. since President Raisi took office in early August. While Raisi has promised to improve Iran's economy, his [appointment of Mohsen Rezaee](#) former commander-in-chief of the IRGC (1980– 1997), as Vice President for Economic Affairs reveals a lack of economic qualifications and knowledge in regard to such crucial tasks.

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Trump's "maximum pressure" has been imposing unprecedented pressure on Iran's economy for the last three years. With the victory of Joe Biden, Tehran has found more windows to circumvent the sanctions, but the situation remains very tough for the Islamic Republic. Iran also is on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) blacklist, which restricts Tehran's financial transactions even with Russia and China. In fact, Mohsen Rezaee, who is now VP for economic affairs, has been one of the opponents of the approval of FATF bills by Tehran. While it is indisputable fact that U.S. sanctions have significantly undermined Iran's economy, many hardliners believe Tehran does not need negotiations toward achieving the lifting of sanctions and the administration should instead invest in what they call a "resistance economy". In this vein, an economic expert [told](#) ISNA (Iranian Students' News Agency) that with the appointed officials dealing with economic affairs in the new administration, it is predictable that the rate of inflation will again increase in the upcoming months. This will aggravate the dire socio-economic crisis and may trigger more protests. In conclusion, Iran's economic situation remains interwoven with Iran's foreign policy preferences that contain enmity with Washington.

EVIN PRISON CAMERAS HACKED

This week, an Iranian hacker group called "Edâlat-e Ali" [released](#) videos from security cameras in Tehran's infamous Evin Prison, where many political prisoners are held.

One of the videos shows an older prisoner in a mask who passes out, falls to the ground and is then dragged upstairs and taken into a ward, while others including a cleric pass by without objecting. The surveillance video also shows inmates fighting, being hit by guards and dragged along the floor, and in one scene smashing a bathroom mirror in an attempt to use the glass to self-harm. The footage also captures the moment prison surveillance system staff realize they have been hacked. Hassan Norouzi, an Iranian MP, [blamed](#) “Zionists” for making and releasing the videos and claimed what he has seen there is ambiguous. The head of the Iranian Prisons Organization, Mohammad-Mehdi Hajmohammadi, [apologized](#) and accepted responsibility for the “unacceptable behavior” at the prison. Meantime, Judiciary head Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei [called](#) on Iran's prosecutor-general to “conduct a comprehensive investigation into the situation at Evin prison and the treatment of prisoners by officers [...] with speed and accuracy.” On its part, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor [tweeted](#) that “recently leaked footage of notorious Evin Prison confirms what we have long known: torture is systemic in Iranian prisons. We call on Iran to release all political prisoners and to treat all prisoners with dignity.” U.S. Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley later retweeted that message. Meanwhile, IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency published a piece that [tried](#) to justify the abuses by pointing fingers at what the U.S. had done in Guantánamo Bay military detention camps.

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Beyond the public outrage the leaked footages have triggered, the security dimension is key. For, unlike in the past when a powerful organization such as Israel's Mossad has been behind myriad cyber-attacks against Iran, this time around it seems the hackers belong to a different sphere. The latter's name “Edâlat-e Ali”, meaning the “righteousness/justice of Ali (the successor of Prophet Mohammad revered by Shias)”, suggests that the operation may be coming from an Iranian group. All this would suggest that Iran's cyber-security architecture is much more vulnerable as previously thought, especially very much contrasting with the IRGC's vast PR efforts to depict it as insurmountable. Indeed, this development could be a game-changer, if more such leaks would emerge in the future shaking the foundations and the self-image of the Islamic Republic, even for those sympathetic with its purported principles.

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