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# **Risks to Rapprochement: The Death of President Raisi, the Israel-Gaza War, and Iranian Regional Policy**

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## Risks to Rapprochement: The Death of President Raisi, the Israel-Gaza War, and Iranian Regional Policy

The helicopter crash that killed Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and six other passengers and crew on May 19, 2024 is unlikely to significantly impact upon Iranian foreign policy in the short-term. That is because the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) is the highest body in charge of Iranian foreign and security policy. However, with Raisi having been a leading hardline contender to succeed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, his removal from the line of succession continues to narrow the field of candidates. It also upsets the process of hardline political consolidation that has been occurring over the past few years.

Following the crash, Raisi's vice president, Mohammed Mokher, was [approved as interim-president](#) by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on May 20 before a presidential election takes place on June 28, 2024. Bagheri Kani, deputy foreign minister since 2021, now serves as caretaker foreign minister. Like Amir Abdollahian, Kani is close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), but [Kani was also lead negotiator](#) in the talks that led up to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 and in a prisoner exchange deal with the US in September 2023. He is also reported as having [engaged in indirect talks with the US](#) in Oman possibly linked to containing the spillover effects from the Israel-Gaza war, potentially extending to include western concerns about the Iranian nuclear program. Kani is therefore better placed to keep lines of communication open with the United States. However, whoever wins the Iranian run-off presidential election on July 5, Iran will continue to be consumed by a number of internal and external challenges, with a foreign policy that continues to be informed by a preference and dependency on the East.

### Saudi-Iran Relations

What this means for the Saudi – Iran normalization deal which centered on “sovereignty of states” and “non-interference in internal affairs” that was brokered by Iraq, Oman, and ultimately, China, in March 2023, is still unclear. However, like the intra-GCC reconciliation in 2021, there was no comprehensive normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran, especially in resolving centuries-old sectarianism and the political rivalry that since 1979 has dominated their interactions. Instead, normalization was pursued on the basis of a number of security and economic rationales: Saudi Arabia avoiding isolation after the US led the Abraham Accords in 2021, Iran seeking an economic lifeline amidst a stringent US-controlled sanctions regime, following Gulf escalations which threatened to compromise economic development diversification efforts (i.e. the many Vision strategies of the GCC states), and in apparent realization among the GCC states that US security guarantees could no longer be relied upon. Despite Saudi offering economic incentives should Iran constrain regional proxies such as the Houthis, including [discussions over the resumption of direct flights](#) in December 2023, the pace of change has been slow. There has also been a high degree of uncertainty about logistical connections, for example, pilgrim flights between the two countries have been delayed due to tensions, [as was the case in February 2024](#).

The Gulf has not experienced the kind of escalation seen in 2019-21, but Iran has [continued to interdict commercial shipping in the Gulf](#). The Houthis have inserted themselves in the Israel-Gaza



war by engaging in attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea which has given them a renewed relevance to regional security but also attracted a combined [US and UK military response](#). Hezbollah has repeatedly struck Israel with rockets, and appears to be emboldened by the combination of growing international criticism for Israel, change within the Iranian political elite, and its experience in the 2006 war with Israel in Lebanon.

In the context of rising tensions during the Gaza war, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and President Raisi found it more fruitful to hold talks on the sidelines of multilateral forums, such as on the sidelines of an extraordinary meeting of the [Organization of Islamic Cooperation \(OIC\) about Gaza, held on 11 November 2023](#). Given their (expected) respective membership in other groupings such as the BRICS, there may be potential to hold talks and explore more opportunities on the sidelines of these meetings in the future as well. As economic dependencies grow with China, Beijing may play a greater role in pushing on certain issues, [as it has done in support of the UAE in its dispute with Iran over several islands in the Gulf](#).

### *Israel*

Raisi maintained a hardline policy towards Israel, reflecting the wishes of the Supreme Leader who is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces and who leads on foreign policy. Iranian foreign policy reflects internal political dynamics and regional and international circumstances, especially the actions of other actors in the region. Key is Saudi Arabia, which is still engaged in negotiations with the US over recognition of Israel based on [an end to the conflict in Gaza, and a practical pathway to a Palestinian state](#), US investments in the Saudi technology sector, a pledge by the Saudis to continue pricing oil in US dollars, and Saudi security status on par with US allies such as Japan and South Korea. It's not clear how the Israel-Palestine peace pathway could be managed, and to what degree it would conform to the [2002 Arab Peace Plan](#) which offered Arab world recognition in return for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. It would probably require a post-Netanyahu government to commit to a series of concrete actions. Sequencing and assurances will be crucial.

Even then, it is not clear how Iran would react. For decades, Iranian regional policy has been based on working with members of the 'axis of resistance' (Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria, various armed Shia groups in Iraq, and the Houthis) to push US forces out of the region and target Israel. Whilst religious competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran has given way to a pragmatic détente, US policies and initiatives have threatened to target and isolate Iran. The addition of Saudi Arabia to the US-led Abraham Accords would further alter the regional balance of power, be perceived as further evidence of negative US policies aimed at Iran, and could spark regional escalation. It would also insert Saudi Arabia into the long running Israel-Iran "[shadow war](#)" which included an [Israeli attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus, Syria](#), on April 1, 2024, an attack that the majority of GCC states condemned. US security guarantees are therefore vital in sustaining any new US-Saudi agreement and yet the chance of congressionally approved US security assurances for the Kingdom before the November 2024 election is unlikely given the number and complexity of competing policy priorities.

Saudi-Israeli normalization is just one of many possibilities that could lead to regional conflagration. There are plenty of other reasons to suspect Saudi-Iran relations might flounder.



Key factors include: the state of US-Iran relations, developments in the Iranian nuclear program and international response, as well as the autonomy and actions of Iran-allied violent non-state actors.

### *United States*

The Biden administration has inherited and implemented US policies in the Middle East labelled in a recent book by CFR scholar Steven Cook as [unrealistic and prone to failure](#). US policy on Iran in particular has been hawkish under successive administrations. The Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, designated the [IRGC a terrorist organization](#) in 2019, launched the Middle East Strategic Alliance that was widely considered to target Iran, and pursued a policy of “maximum pressure.” Indeed, it was escalation in the Gulf from 2019-21, including the assassination of IRGC command Qasem Soleimani, attacks on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil installations, and the lack of immediate US military response that helped create the conditions for de-escalation pursued by some of the GCC states from 2021.

The Biden administration has been supportive of GCC-Iran dialogue but reluctant to roll back the IRGC designation due to its ongoing contentious activities. US nuclear diplomacy, led by US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley, has been marred by an [FBI probe over his handling of classified information](#). His security clearance was revoked in June 2023 and he has been on leave since. Contemporary US concerns have been Iranian supplies of drones to Russia that have been used in the Ukraine war, developments in the Iranian nuclear programme, and in 2024, a direct [Iranian attack on Israel](#) which could have caused catastrophic escalation and regional conflict. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has visited the region on many occasions in search of a solution to end the war in Gaza and reshape the Middle East by achieving a Saudi-Israeli deal. Iran rarely features. Back channel diplomacy may achieve limited gains but given the reorientation of Iranian policy (especially towards Russia), ongoing turbulence in the region and war in Gaza which threatens to undermine any peace deal, and (impending) change in Iranian and US domestic politics, diplomatic breakthroughs remain highly unlikely.

A second Trump presidency is a distinct possibility following the November 2024 elections and there is every reason to assume that his former policies of disengagement, transactional, and *carte blanche* regional policies will return. That might mean more autonomy for some GCC states which manage to successfully lobby the White House or Trump’s commercial interests, but it carries with it inherent risks for policy missteps. The re-imposition of the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” policy on Iran would also have dire consequences for Saudi-Iran relations given the potential for Iran to lash out at US allies in the region as it did in 2019.

### *The Iranian Nuclear Program*

As US pressure on Iran has weakened, the “outbreak time” – the time to produce enough weapons-grade uranium for a nuclear bomb - has drastically shortened to [just weeks or even days](#). Iran’s lack of cooperation has been continually highlighted over the past couple of years, including a European-drafted International Atomic Energy Agency ([IAEA](#)) [resolution passed in June](#). Should Iran become a nuclear weapons state, as the Saudi foreign minister has asserted, [all bets would be off](#). Saudi Arabia might be forced to abandon a civil nuclear deal with the US in favour of



unrestricted access to uranium deposits on its territory, and pending the US policy response, Riyadh could instead pursue an enhanced security agreement with Russia ([if it hasn't done so already](#)) or China to immediately enhance its nuclear deterrence. Other GCC states might be similarly alarmed at a sudden shift in the nuclear balance.

## Conclusion

During the Hamas-Israel war in Gaza which has attracted the interest of Hezbollah and the Houthis, the onus on finding a diplomatic solution to the war and avoiding regional escalations have overridden grassroots diplomacy in the region. The economic status of Iran (under sanctions) and Saudi Arabia (pursuing stability and economic objectives) are broadly complementary, and both states have exhibited a continued interest in dialogue. However, since regional stability generally rests in the hands of the US President and Congress, and Iranian regional proxies over which Tehran has questionable control, the processes of diplomacy, de-escalation and rapprochement remains suspended, knotted, and ill-defined.

In the short-term, Iran and Saudi Arabia [could implement the security agreement](#) they signed two-decades ago. More fundamental to advancing regional interaction would be Saudi Arabia signing a normalization agreement with an Israeli government that is willing to do the heavy lifting of implementing its side of the bargain on Palestinian statehood. However, there is no guarantee that the agreement would be met with jubilation in Tehran, quite the contrary, since it would undermine a large part of the revolutionary ideology embedded in the post-1979 Iranian regime.

Pending the outcomes of the Iranian and US presidential elections in 2024, further steps could be taken in the security sphere, with nuclear, missile, drone and regional dimensions. This would have to be done in conjunction with formal US security agreements with most, if not all GCC states, and Israel, as a precursor, plus a new security understanding that safeguards Iranian sovereignty. In a period of high threat perception, political uncertainty, and due to established modes of operation and conduct, including Iran's "Look East" policy and growing dependency on China, deepening Saudi-Iran ties are set to remain unstable and uncertain.

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