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THE SUDDEN DEATH OF IRAN'S HIGHEST POLITICAL OFFICIALS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE REGION



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.

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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



THE SUDDEN DEATH OF IRAN'S HIGHEST POLITICAL OFFICIALS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE REGION

INTRODUCTION

On the 19th of May of this year, Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, the eighth President of Iran, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Seyyed Mohammad Ali Al-Hashem, the representative of the Supreme Leader in East Azerbaijan, Malek Rahmati, the Governor of East Azerbaijan, and four other passengers were killed in a crash involving a Bal 412 helicopter. This incident occurred while Ebrahim Raisi, accompanied by several colleagues, was traveling to East Azerbaijan to inaugurate the border dam "Qiz Qalasi." The crash took place on their return journey in a mountainous area (2 kilometers southwest of the village of Ouzi, located north of Varzeqan in East Azerbaijan province). The primary cause of this accident remains unclear.

From 1936 to 2024, 24 high-ranking officials (16 presidents and 8 prime ministers) in various countries have died in helicopter crashes. These incidents were caused by technical failures, thick fog and lack of sufficient visibility for pilots, natural disasters, attacks and assassinations, and adverse weather conditions. The incident involving Ebrahim Raisi and his accompanying delegation is the 25th and most recent of such occurrences. Before he was elected president in 2021, Raisi served as the head of the judiciary.

After assuming the presidency on the 3th of August, 2021, Ebrahim Raisi announced that his administration's priority would be to focus on domestic policy, adopting an inward-looking approach that emphasized internal development as a foundation for external engagement. Domestically, Raisi emphasized the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear efforts, the lifting of sanctions, and support for related diplomatic initiatives. Regionally, he advocated for resolving regional crises through regional dialogues and a policy of good neighborliness. On the international stage, he pursued peace and justice in international relations and stressed leveraging the country's capabilities to counter oppressive and hegemonic states. Given this political approach, the highest political figure in Raisi's administration, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, was also killed alongside him.

This analysis aims to explore the factors leading to the helicopter crash carrying Raisi and analyze its various aspects, both evident and hidden. It will then address the reactions to this incident and its impact on Iran's political approach in the region.

CAUSES OF THE HELICOPTER CRASH

Although no unified report has been provided on the details of the helicopter crash involving the Iranian president, based on the statements made about this incident, the possible causes of the crash can be divided into internal and external factors:

Internal Factors:



Administrative Weakness: This factor includes several specific points which will be addressed. First is the administrative weakness and the failed management of Raisi's team in the presidency of Iran. Despite reports that the weather conditions in the area on the day of the incident were uncertain, it was also known to all parties aware of the president's trip that Raisi's route was mountainous and forested. So why did this trip take place? This question has yet to be adequately answered by any Iranian official.

Negligence in Protection: Negligence in protecting senior government officials of Iran. According to the statements of Gholamhossein Esmaili, the Chief of Staff of the President's Office (after the pilots coordinated with the commander of the helicopter carrying the president to move over the existing cloud patch, the middle helicopter carrying the president disappeared after 30 seconds of continuing the route), it appears that among the three helicopters belonging to the president's convoy, the weakest pilot was in the helicopter carrying the president, because despite having command, it still met with an accident.

Technical Malfunctions: In addition to lightning, technical malfunctions and sabotage are other factors that cause helicopter crashes. So how is it possible that a country owning the best helicopters transfers its highest government officials in old and unreliable aircraft (it is said that this helicopter was old)?

Possible Assassination: The fourth and final internal factor, which seems a small and very weak possibility, has been mentioned by some media outlets. It involves the potential assassination of Raisi by power rivals, considering his possible succession to leadership in Iran after Ali Khamenei. This might be possible if explosive materials were placed in the helicopter carrying Raisi and then detonated.

External Factors

Israeli or American Intelligence: It is possible that the crash of the helicopter carrying the president was orchestrated by Israeli or American intelligence. For several years, particularly after the start of the Al-Aqsa Storm initiative by Palestinian Islamic movements against Israel on October 7, hostilities between Israel and Iran have entered a new phase, sometimes leading to confrontations. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to consider that this incident could have resulted from a planned attack by the intelligence services of either the United States or Israel. Although no official statements have been made by any party involved, former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has indirectly accused the United States, suggesting that the American sanctions on the sale of helicopters to Iran have caused these aircraft to become outdated and unreliable.

Other Powers' Intelligence: Another possibility is that this incident was orchestrated by the intelligence services of other powers, particularly Russia, to provoke a confrontation between Iran, the United States, and Israel. Engaging the United States in another conflict, in addition to its indirect involvement in Ukraine and ongoing tensions with Israel, would undoubtedly pose a significant challenge for the U.S.

Moreover, statements from Gholamhossein Esmaili, the Chief of Staff of the President's Office, indicated that the weather was clear during the flight, with only a small cloud patch over the valley,



which they had decided to fly over in coordination. The first and third helicopters passed within 30 seconds, but the middle one, carrying the president, disappeared. Esmaili also claimed that from the beginning of the search until the last moments, no signs of an explosion, fire, or smoke were found in the area. Therefore, it is not impossible that the helicopter carrying the Iranian president was attacked while in the air.

REACTIONS TO THE HELICOPTER CRASH

Reactions to the helicopter crash can be divided into two sections for ease of reading: reactions from Iranians both inside and outside the country, and reactions from other countries.

Iranian Reactions:

Supporters of the Islamic Republic of Iran: This group includes the highest-ranking individuals, starting with the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. From him to others, they expressed deep sorrow and declared five days of public mourning, considering the death of President Ebrahim Raisi and his colleagues a great loss for the Iranian nation.

Opponents of the Islamic Republic of Iran: This group is composed of those who oppose the current regime. For instance, Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi referred to Ebrahim Raisi as a criminal against humanity and one of the most ruthless and notorious leaders of the current Iranian regime, expressing regret that he was not tried for his crimes. Other opponents of the regime within Iran celebrated Raisi's death by distributing sweets, dancing, and rejoicing, as they considered Raisi's government to be oppressive and tyrannical.

International Reactions:

The simultaneous death of the Iranian President and Foreign Minister along with other colleagues in the helicopter crash elicited global and regional reactions. These include condolences from Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, Prime Minister of Afghanistan; Pope Francis, the leader of the world's Catholics; the NATO spokesperson on the X network; the President of the European Council; a minute of silence during a United Nations Security Council meeting; and statements from the foreign ministries of many countries. Despite the five-day public mourning in Iran, countries like Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, India, Turkey, Pakistan, and Tajikistan also declared public mourning in solidarity with Iran. Additionally, according to Iranian media, senior officials from 68 countries attended the funeral of the crash victims. From Afghanistan, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, and Amir Khan Muttaqi, Acting Foreign Minister of the Islamic Emirate, led a delegation to Iran to participate in President Raisi's funeral.

REGIONAL IMPACTS OF RAISE'S HELICOPTER CRASH

Before discussing the regional impacts of President Raisi's helicopter crash, it is necessary to briefly look at Iran's internal politics. In countries like Iran, where there is a stronger decision-making



authority than the president, such as the Supreme Leader of Iran, it is unlikely that the incident will have profound effects on domestic policy. Additionally, countries with constitutions have provisions for addressing such emergencies and can easily appoint successors. Following the announcement of Ebrahim Raisi's death, Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, appointed Mohammad Mokhber, the First Vice President, as the Acting President based on Article 131 of the Constitution. He tasked Mokhber, along with the heads of the legislative and judicial branches, to arrange for a new president to be elected within a maximum of 50 days. Meanwhile, Ali Bagheri was appointed as the Acting Foreign Minister by the new Acting President, Mohammad Mokhber.

Despite these measures, the influence of key figures and personalities in any government cannot be ignored concerning power balance, government relations with other institutions, and political and social concerns.

REGIONAL IMPACTS

Iran's foreign policy can be divided into several domains:

Interactions with Regional Powers (China and Russia): These interactions are based on individual and shared interests in opposition to the Western bloc. Iran needs to maintain a multi-faceted relationship with these powers to preserve its position.

Relations with Gulf Arab Countries (especially Saudi Arabia): The Raisi administration managed to improve relations with Saudi Arabia from a confrontational stance to a more cooperative one. With new officials in place for less than two months, Iran might either continue Raisi's policy or change its strategic approach. Iran's active role in supporting Palestinian Islamic movements might force Saudi Arabia into a cautious engagement with Iran.

Relations with Israel, Lebanon, and Iraq: This domain is crucial for Iran's reputation, as it is partially at war with Israel and cannot easily shift its stance in favor of Israel in the region. Iran must position itself against Israel, support its opponents, and maintain relations wherever Israeli and American presence is significant.

Relations with Neighboring Countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India): In this domain, Iran's foreign policy is shaped by considerations like regional influence, economic ties, common enemies, and alliances with global powers. For instance, Iran might collaborate with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to combat "ISIS" and was Afghanistan's top economic partner last year according to World Bank reports. However, Iran's policy of forcibly deporting Afghan refugees has created tensions. Despite sending a special representative to Kabul, Iran has not yet officially recognized the Islamic Emirate and frequently criticizes it regarding inclusive governance and citizens' rights. Therefore, it is unlikely that Iran's political approach toward Afghanistan will change significantly after Raisi's and his Foreign Minister's deaths.



Finally, Raisi's death and the subsequent appointments of high-ranking officials could impact Iran's engagements and actions in accelerating or delaying certain negotiations and agreements with regional countries.

CONCLUSION

Given the current situation and changes in the Iranian government, predicting exact changes in its foreign policy is challenging. Therefore, before a comprehensive investigation by the Iranian government and its relevant institutions is conducted, setting specific scenarios in this regard does not seem very purposeful. However, it is expected that the Islamic Republic of Iran, under new leadership, will continue to support the Gaza conflict and the brutal attacks by Israel, alongside other powers and countries involved. Just as efforts were made during Ebrahim Raisi's tenure, the Islamic Republic of Iran is likely to continue its material and moral support and cooperation because significant changes are underway, and it is in Iran's interest to be involved.

Furthermore, Iran must de-escalate tensions in its relations and expand its interactions with neighboring countries, particularly Afghanistan. Although the Iranian government under Ebrahim Raisi has been named Afghanistan's top economic partner currently, there have been complaints in areas such as refugees, recognition of the Islamic Emirate, and other technical collaborations, leading to ups and downs in the relationship between the two countries. Therefore, to develop cooperation and improve comprehensive relations between the two countries, the following recommendations are presented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthen Bilateral Relations:** The new leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran should prioritize strengthening bilateral relations with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to resolve common issues and enhance economic and security cooperation between both countries.
2. **Economic Support and Investment:** Supporting economic development and investing in various infrastructure projects in Afghanistan can aid economic growth and job creation in both countries, contributing to the prosperity and stability of Afghanistan.
3. **Support for Afghan Refugees:** Afghans appreciate the patience of the Iranian government and people and seek continued support from the Islamic Republic for Afghan refugees. They hope for more patience and the provision of job and educational opportunities for refugees, ensuring that Afghan refugees in Iran are not used as leverage against the Afghan government.
4. **Collaboration in Knowledge and Technology:** Expanding Iran's cooperation with Afghanistan in the field of knowledge and technology, and sharing experiences in this area, can foster culture, entrepreneurship, and innovation in Afghanistan, enhancing the country's technological capabilities and access.
5. **Promotion of Islamic Culture and Values:** The new Iranian leadership should actively cooperate with the Islamic Emirate in promoting Islamic culture and values to preserve and protect them.



Cooperation in cultural and artistic fields can strengthen friendly relations between the two countries.

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