



## Iran: Dealing with the Devil

President Biden's foreign policy team hopes to renew the U.S.-Iranian nuclear deal signed under President Obama and cancelled in 2018 by President Trump. Yet the Biden team is confronting a reality that Iran's new hard-line government will not accept a deal easily. Meanwhile, there are intelligence reports that Iran continues to spin its centrifuges to enrich its uranium supply necessary for the development of nuclear weapons.

In 2015 Iran and six countries including the U.S. reached an historic agreement called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, popularly known as the Iran nuclear deal. Iran promised to dismantle much of its nuclear program and to allow international inspectors into their nuclear facilities. In exchange, international sanctions worth billions of dollars were lifted, Iran was allowed to begin selling on the international oil market, and Iran was paid \$400 million in cash from the U.S. government simultaneously with the release of four American hostages.

The deal drew immediate criticism from conservatives because restrictions on Iran's centrifuges would last only 10 years (to 2025) and the limitations on uranium enrichment would disappear five years after that (2030). Hence, some feared that once these restrictions expire, Iran could rapidly develop a nuclear weapon.

In 2018 President Trump ended the deal, declaring it defective. Trump argued that the deal did not address Iran's support of terrorism in the region or its continuing development of a missile system.

The Biden administration renewed international talks with Iran to resurrect the Obama accords. Why is anyone's conjecture. Whatever Trump did, whether on our domestic border or abroad, Biden seems to want to do the opposite. More probable, though, is that the Biden foreign policy team believe in all their hearts that Iran can be persuaded to moderate its course of action; all the United States and its European partners need to do is speak to the moderates within the Iran government, whoever they might be.

The election of Ebrahim Raisi to the Iranian presidency in 2021 shows that Iran's hard-liners are now in power. The Iranian election was riddled with corruption, as more moderate candidates were excluded from running. The turnout for the election was the lowest in Iranian history, indicating that average Iranians understood that the election was a fraud. Raisi is a monster, well known for his role in the four-member Tehran "death committee" which, under the aegis of the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, ordered the execution of an estimated 3,000 political prisoners in 1988.

### A Commissioner of Death

Average Iranians have not forgotten Raisi's role as a commissioner of death. They fear and hate him. When Raisi ran for the presidency in 2017, he was opposed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. By 2021, however, Khamenei, understanding the growth of the hard-liners within the ruling elite, especially the Revolutionary Guard, relented and backed Raisi. Domestic opposition to the regime, coming from the young, oil workers, and minority ethnic groups, led the regime to adopt a tougher stance.

*With the new, more ardent anti-American true believers in power, Iran appears to be moving further and further away from reaching any agreement with the West on a nuclear deal.* Heiko Maas, Germany's former Foreign Minister under Angela Merkel, observed last July shortly before leaving his position, "I am seeing with growing unease that Iran is delaying the resumption of the Vienna nuclear talks, and on the other hand it is simultaneously moving further and further away from core elements of the agreement." The environment has grown worse since July when Maas offered his pessimistic assessment.

By December 2021, European negotiators warned after five days of meetings with Iran diplomats in Vienna that unless Tehran shifted its stance quickly, there was little possibility of a successful negotiation. The diplomats were

anxious to add that European governments “remain fully committed to a diplomatic way forward.”<sup>2</sup>

U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, after meeting with Russia’s foreign minister in Stockholm in December, said that Iran’s actions do not bode well, but “it is not too late for Iran to reverse course.”<sup>3</sup> Blinken ignored a call from the Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett urging him to abandon negotiations with Iran given its unreasonable demands. The Biden administration wants a deal to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon for 25 years.

Israeli intelligence reports that the Islamic Republic of Iran is headed toward enriching uranium to 90 percent purity, the level necessary for nuclear weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Iran has begun enriching uranium to 20 percent purity through many advanced centrifuges deeply buried in its Fordow plant. The step from enriching uranium from 20 percent to a nuclear weapon-grade material is a relatively short one. Yet, even as the IAEA reported this, agency officials declined to admonish Iran. The agency’s passivity toward condemning Iran, demanding compliance with non-proliferation obligations or referring Tehran to the UN Security Council indicates that hopes linger that a deal with Iran can be struck.<sup>4</sup>

American and Western diplomats hoping for a treaty with Iran understand that the political environment has changed in Iran following Raisi’s election. *Raisi’s record as a torturer and executioner of thousands is well known.* Yet, the West has a record of making deals with tyrannical regimes, especially if it serves immediate political interests. Deals were reached between Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta; Nixon and Mao in 1972; and Obama and Iran in 2015. The Biden administration is eager for an Iranian deal, perhaps at any cost.

### **Raisi: A Revolutionary Monster**

**R**aisi is the choice of Iran’s anti-reformist deep state centered on the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and other state agencies. These arms of the state were deeply alienated by the centrist incumbent president Hassan Rouhani, who served as president of Iran from 2013 to 2021. Rouhani’s administration and his left-of-center coalition promised social and economic reforms, only to fail to act on either of those promises. Social discontent, mass demonstrations and rioting broke out throughout the country under his presidency, and the ruling elite reacted by pushing Raisi forward.

Without the questionable disqualification of other candidates by the Guardian Council, which is controlled by the Supreme Leader, Raisi would not have won the election. By the time the Guardian Council, charged under the constitution with vetting candidates, was finished, only two lackluster “reformists” were left on the ballot. Only a little over 48 percent of the electorate turned out for the 2021 election, the lowest since the Islamic Republic was formed after the 1979 revolution. Average Iranians understood how the authoritarians had narrowed the choices for candidates, and they were not willing to play the game.

President Raisi’s reputation as a monster preceded him into office. He is a product of the Iranian revolution and a protégé of the Ayatollah Khomeini, who came into power in 1979 promising liberation and democracy, but once in power brought terror, mass executions and a one-party theocratic state. Khomeini’s ascent to power is graphically described in historian Donald Critchlow’s new book *Revolutionary Monsters: How Five Men Turned Liberation into Tyranny* (2021). Critchlow writes that in July 1988 the ailing Khomeini issued a decree that proclaimed, “Annihilate the enemies of Islam immediately! Those who are in prison throughout the country and remain steadfast [in their opposition to the revolution] are waging war on God and are condemned to execution. . . . It is naïve to show mercy to those who wage war on God.”<sup>5</sup>

### **A 1980s Bloodbath**

**A**n estimated *19,000 to 30,000 prisoners were executed beginning in July 1988.* Hundreds of prisoners were hanged each day and buried in mass graves.

These executions were the culmination of a counter-revolutionary campaign already well underway. In the early 1980s, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps members were unleashed by the regime to go into neighborhoods to root out counter-revolutionaries. The Revolutionary Guard had been organized by Khomeini to operate outside of the judiciary, government or army, only subsequently to become integral to today’s regime.

Unrestrained by police or judicial authorities, Revolutionary Guard members began arresting and interrogating accused enemies of the state. One such victim was Farideh Goudarzi, a 19-year-old pregnant woman. On a hot July afternoon in 1983, a dozen Revolutionary Guard members broke into her home and carted her off for interrogation. She was thrown into an interrogation room already covered in fresh blood from her husband, who had been tortured there. There she was beaten with electric cables by eight men. Standing in the corner, she recalls, was one

young man who especially seemed to enjoy seeing her beaten. That man was Ebrahim Raisi.<sup>6</sup>

After giving birth to her son, Goudarzi served six years behind bars in Hamedan. Each day she heard prisoners taken out in the dead of night to be executed. One was her husband. She was not alone. Another victim was Mahmoud Royale, who was arrested in late August 1981. He remembers, “We were made to stand in the hallway, and all you could hear were the screams of those being tortured—I remember the screams of women being severely flogged and raped by their captors. I had never heard anything like it.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Tehran Death Committee

Raisi was a member of the Tehran “death committee” that carried out the extrajudicial executions of thousands of political dissidents in prisons near Tehran between late July and early September 1988. The execution of these political prisoners was a result of an earlier call by Khomeini to crack down on dissenters and apostates of Islam. Khomeini ordered the creation of three-man committees in each province with the extra-judicial authority to arrest alleged opponents of the regime. Each committee included an Islamic law judge (often without any training in law), an intelligence ministry official, the province’s prosecutor general and sometimes his deputy.

In Tehran, Khomeini appointed Hossein Ali Nayeri, an Islamic judge, Morteza Eshraghi, prosecutor general, Mostafa Pourmohammadi from the intelligence ministry, and Raisi serving as deputy prosecutor. At the age of 27, he was the youngest person on this death committee. The first step of the committee was to interrogate imprisoned inmates as to their political and religious beliefs before imposing death sentences. Khomeini instructed this committee and other provincial committees that “Even though a unanimous decision is better, the view of the majority of the three must prevail. . . . It is naïve to show mercy to those who wage war on God. The decisive way in which Islam treats the enemies of God is among the unquestionable tenets of the Islamic regime.”<sup>8</sup>

Prisoners affiliated with an Islamic-Marxist group, the People’s Mujahedeen of Iran (MEK), were singled out. MEK initially supported Khomeini, but turned against the government over the constitution giving inordinate political power to the Supreme Leader. In the 1980s, MEK was involved in the assassination of senior Iran officials. Most MEK members had not been involved in these terrorist attacks, but were imprisoned for supporting counter-revolution.

*Raisi makes no apologies for his direct role in these mass executions and other crimes against Iranians.* After he

was elected president, he told the press, “I am proud that in my role as a prosecutor, wherever I was I have always defended people’s rights, security, and tranquility.”<sup>9</sup>

After Khomeini’s death in 1989, all four members of the Tehran death committee went on to higher positions in the government, but none as high as Raisi.<sup>10</sup> His rise to prominence within the regime began when he was 19 years old, when he was appointed the assistant prosecutor of the Karaj Revolutionary Prosecutor’s Office. These revolutionary prosecutors operated outside the established judiciary system. The following year, he became the chief prosecutor in Karaj, followed by an appointment as prosecutor of Hamadan. He gained a reputation for ruthless pursuit of enemies of the regime. This reputation led to his appointments in Tehran, where he solidified his hard-line reputation.<sup>11</sup>

In 2016 Raisi was appointed head of Astan Quds Razavi, one of the largest financial institutions in the Middle East. The foundation finances terrorism throughout the region and in other countries. Quds has deep relations with Hezbollah operating in southern Lebanon. In 2018, Raisi visited Hezbollah’s military positions in southern Lebanon and met with top Hezbollah leaders. Raisi announced, “Now in the world, a new civilization in the name of Islam is on the verge of creation.”<sup>12</sup> After this visit, the U.S. Treasury Department placed Raisi on its sanctions list. The Quds foundation funds training camps in Iran for spies and terrorists, and supports cultural conferences to promote Shia fundamentalism.

### Instability in Iran

Raisi was selected to head the Iranian regime not because he has the political skills to unite the people or unify the factions within the ruling elite. He was put into office—under the guise of being democratically elected—to ensure that dissent is crushed and the regime pursues a terrorist policy internationally. *Continuing outbreaks of opposition to the Iranian regime indicate that the rulers are losing political legitimacy among the masses.*<sup>13</sup>

Protests erupted throughout the country in 2017, 2018 and 2019. These protests suggest that spontaneous protests can occur at a moment’s notice.<sup>14</sup> The Iranian currency is in free fall. Raisi was approved by the Supreme Leader Khamenei, but among the Iranian public he is known as the “Henchman of 1988.” Especially significant in the growing resistance movement in Iran have been extensive anti-regime protests by Iran’s Ahwazi Arab minority in the country’s western Khuzestan Province.<sup>15</sup>

In July 2021, demonstrators stormed the municipal office in Ahavz City. In response, security forces fired live rounds against the demonstrators, reportedly leaving three protesters dead. Iranian security claims to have intercepted illegal weapons shipments coming into Khuzestan.

Water shortages are severe in Iran's western provinces, home to a large Arab ethnic minority of Ahwazis, who assert that Tehran is deliberately causing shortages by diverting water from the Karun River that runs through the province. Water shortages have provoked demonstrations, but underlying the protest are ethno-nationalist tensions. Ahwazis, numbering about 5 million people, live primarily in two strategic provinces: Khuzestan, where the country's oil and national gas production and major ports are located, and the Persian Gulf region, which sees considerable maritime traffic.

Demonstrators have carried banners in Arabic proclaiming, "We shall redeem you, Ahwaz, with our spirit and blood." Tehran has attempted to disperse the Ahwazi population through forced evictions and job discrimination. Persians have been given high-paying jobs in the oil industry, while Ahwazi are mostly relegated to blue-collar positions. There have been several attacks on the Iranian military and Islamic Revolutionary Guard units in Khuzestan, including the killing of 30 Iranian security forces in a military parade in September 2018. In response, Tehran deployed foreign fighters from Lebanon and Iraq to quell resistance.

Other Iranian resistance groups do not support Ahwazi nationalism. Still, instability is evident throughout Iran, resulting in a nervous ruling elite.

### The Biden Administration's Challenge

**T**he Biden administration wants nothing more than to renew the nuclear deal with Iran. The hard-liners within Iran want a deal that brings U.S. funds to the

country's faltering economy. At the same time, the extremist faction does not want to be accused of making deals with the Great Satan, the United States.

The Biden administration realizes that the hard-liners are in control of Iran today. *Any hope of a moderate faction (whatever moderate means in Iranian politics) having power in Iran is lost.* Biden faces a terrorist regime, one that has caused profound instability throughout the region. Israel will not allow a nuclearized Iran, nor will the Saudis. In June 2021 there were reports of another sabotage of Iran's nuclear facility in Natanz, the third one in two years.<sup>16</sup>

How the Biden administration will deal with the devil remains the question of day. This administration's dealings with Afghanistan and China do not inspire confidence.

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- 1 John Sexton, "Biden Is Trying to Restore the Iran Deal But It May Be Too Late," *Hot Air*, July 31, 2021.
  - 2 "Iran Nuclear Talks Head for Collapse Unless Tehran Shifts, Europeans Say," *New York Times*, December 12, 2021.
  - 3 Ibid.
  - 4 Andrew Striker, "U.S. and Europe Must Counter Potential Weapons-Grade Enrichment by Iran," *Foundation for the Defense of Democracy Policy Brief*, December 2, 2021.
  - 5 Quoted in Donald Critchlow, *Revolutionary Monsters* (2021), p. 166.
  - 6 Hollie McKay, "Iran's Torture Mastermind Becomes Its Next President," *RedState*, August 2, 2021.
  - 7 Ibid.
  - 8 Ibid.
  - 9 Tyler O'Neil, "New Iran Prez Defends Mass Execution of Thousands of Political Prisoners," *PJ Media*, June 21, 2021. Also, "Iran: Who is Ebrahim Raisi?" *NCRI*, June 27, 2020.
  - 10 He became chief prosecutor in Tehran from 1989 to 1994, then first deputy to the head of the Judiciary from 2004 to 2014, then prosecutor general of Iran from 2014-2016, then head of the Judiciary from 2019 until his selection to the presidency. In his roles as a prosecutor and member of the Judiciary he was involved in the arbitrary arrests of thousands of peaceful protesters, dissidents and human rights defenders and in the prosecution of ethnic and religious minorities.
  - 11 Hollie McKay, *RedState*, op. cit.
  - 12 "Iran: Who is Ebrahim Raisi?" *NCRI*, June 27, 2020.
  - 13 Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, "Iran Election: What Ebrahim Raisi's Victory Will Mean for His Country—and the Rest of the World," *The Conversation*, June 21, 2021.
  - 14 Hamid Enayat, "The Mullahs Have Lost the Iranian People," *The American Thinker*, July 14, 2021.
  - 15 Brenda Shaffer, "The Impact of the Ahwaz Protest in Iran," Policy Brief, *Energy*, July 18, 2021.
  - 16 <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/sabotage-at-irans-natanz-nuclear-facility-30-analysis-687849>.
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