



Iran's President Dies in Helicopter Crash

May 21, 2024

On May 19, 2024, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and several other officials [were killed](#) when their helicopter crashed amid bad weather in mountainous northwestern Iran. Raisi's death comes at a particularly tense moment for the Iranian government, which last month launched its [first-ever direct military attack on Israel](#) and continues to face public discontent at home. While Raisi's death appears unlikely to substantively change Iranian foreign or domestic policies in the near term, related developments may have implications for U.S. policy and Congress.

Ebrahim Raisi and His Presidency

Born in 1960, Raisi was reportedly a [participant](#) in the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah and replaced his government with the Islamic Republic. After a period of [religious education](#), Raisi was appointed deputy prosecutor general of Tehran and served on the commission that ordered the [execution of thousands of political prisoners](#) in 1988. He continued to advance through the hierarchy of the Islamic Republic, including by winning election to the Assembly of Experts (the body responsible for choosing Iran's paramount decision-maker, the Supreme Leader) in 2006. He placed second in the 2017 presidential election behind incumbent Hassan Rouhani, after which Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed Raisi as the head of Iran's judiciary. While Raisi was in that position, the United States [sanctioned](#) him pursuant to [Executive Order \(E.O.\) 13876](#).

In 2021, Raisi again ran for president, winning an "[exceptionally uncompetitive](#)" race in which the government's Guardian Council disqualified moderate candidates from running. Raisi's accession to the presidency further fueled [longstanding speculation](#) that he might succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader (see below). Less than half of eligible Iranians voted, the [lowest turnout](#) in the Islamic Republic's history up to that point.

Raisi's presidency was dominated by continued tensions with the United States, including attacks by Iran-backed groups on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria; [economic challenges](#); closer Iranian ties with [Russia](#) and [China](#); and the [protest movement](#) sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini. Protests appeared to recede in 2023 in the wake of a violent government crackdown that included alleged [crimes against humanity](#) (per a United Nations fact-finding mission). Further declines in voter turnout in March 2024 [parliamentary elections](#) and May 2024 [run-offs](#), as well as the [relatively muted](#) public response to Raisi's death, may signal continued popular discontent.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN12365

What Now?

Raisi's death, while returning from a [visit to neighboring Azerbaijan](#) in a [decades-old U.S.-origin helicopter](#), leaves the presidency vacant for the [second time](#) in the history of the Islamic Republic. Per the [Iranian constitution](#), in the event of the president's death, his deputy is to assume the "powers and functions of the President," and a council of three senior leaders is to arrange for the election of a new president within 50 days.

With Supreme Leader Khamenei's [assent](#), First Vice President [Mohammad Mokhber](#) has assumed the position of acting or interim president. The United States sanctioned Mokhber [pursuant to E.O. 13876 in January 2021](#) as then-head of the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (also known as Setad), a [Khamenei-linked](#) "business juggernaut" with "a stake in nearly every sector of the Iranian economy." It remains unclear who the Guardian Council will permit to run for president in the election, [reportedly scheduled for June 28](#). Former lead nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani, a [hardliner with family ties to Khamenei](#), [has succeeded](#) Amir-Abdollahian as acting foreign minister.

Most [speculation](#) about [Iranian leadership](#) succession [in the past year](#) had focused not on Raisi but on eighty-five-year-old Supreme Leader Khamenei, who suffered a bout of serious illness [in 2022](#). Raisi was widely seen as a top candidate to succeed him; Khamenei himself ascended to the Supreme Leader position from the presidency in 1989. Raisi's death leaves [Khamenei's son Mojtaba](#) as the [most widely discussed possible successor](#), though some observers see him as an [unlikely choice](#).

Future Implications

Given that Supreme Leader Khamenei remains the ultimate decisionmaker in Iran, it appears unlikely that Raisi's death will prompt immediate changes in Iranian government policy as Iranian leaders focus on ensuring the election of an acceptable successor. Khamenei's hardline posture at home (including an unyielding stance on the mandatory headscarf for women) and abroad (including support for anti-U.S. and anti-Israel groups across the region) is [likely to continue](#) unabated.

Raisi's death adds uncertainty into what is already an [unsettled situation in Iran](#) and further complicates the question of who might succeed Khamenei when his rule ends, a potentially vulnerable moment for the regime. [Some observers](#) have speculated that the expected presidential election may see even lower turnout, undermining the government's legitimacy, and possibly renewed violence. Depending on various factors, including [public opinion in Iran](#), Khamenei's successor could continue, [double down on](#), or [deprioritize](#) various aspects of his hardline rule. Any leader of the Islamic Republic, as currently constituted, is unlikely to reverse Iran's official longstanding rejection of U.S. influence in the Middle East or move to end decades of U.S.-Iran enmity. A State Department [press statement](#) expressed official condolences for Raisi's death while affirming U.S. support for the Iranian people's "struggle for human rights and fundamental freedom;" some [Members of Congress](#) criticized this statement.

For now, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) appears to retain decisive influence over Iranian foreign and domestic policy. Designated as a U.S. [Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2019](#), the IRGC is responsible for regime security, coordinates Iran's support for regional armed groups and other external operations, and plays a major unofficial role in Iran's economy. Some [observers assess](#) that the rise of the IRGC, which has been closely aligned with both [Khamenei](#) and [Raisi](#), has coincided with the decrease in influence of the [clerical establishment](#), though [others dispute](#) that assessment and the notion that the IRGC and the clergy are oppositional entities.

Raisi's death may not directly alter relations with the United States, though changes to power dynamics in Iran could have implications for U.S. interests. As Congress continues to review U.S. policy toward Iran, Members may consider how U.S. policy choices (among many other factors) might influence, and in turn be influenced by, developments in Iranian leadership personnel and policy.

Author Information

Clayton Thomas
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.