

# Against All Odds, Iran and Saudi Ties Remain Strong

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[Ebrahim Raisi](#), the 8<sup>th</sup> President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, [died in a helicopter crash](#) on Sunday, along with his Foreign Minister and others.

Raisi will be remembered foremost as a cleric. He was successful in garnering support from the political circles, as well as the religious ones. He studied Islam at the seminary in Qom, and called himself an ayatollah, which is a title reserved for high-ranking Shiite clerics. His black turban identified him as a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed.

Raisi had been seen as a possible successor to **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei** as supreme leader, the highest political and religious position in Iran.

Following the death of Iran's first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989, Raisi was appointed prosecutor of Tehran, and took his position as a jurist based on Islamic law very seriously.

After taking office as president, Raisi faced a difficult situation because of U.S. sanctions on Iran. President Trump had torn-up the nuclear deal, and had launched a maximum pressure campaign of even more sanctions. In 1998, Richard N. Haas wrote that [U.S. sanctions](#) are not effective on major changes, such as 'regime change'. But, the Oval Office and Capitol Hill refuse to stop imposing sanctions on countries around the world, regardless of their lack of success. The crushing sanctions on Syria are a prime example of sanctions killing citizens, but having no effect on 'regime change'.

Iran's economy was suffering under U.S. sanctions, but also the effects of corruption, nepotism and inefficiency, which are the same factors most of the regional countries in the Middle East are grappling with. Raisi promised the people he would tackle inflation,

corruption and tax evasion and had some success. But by May-June 2022, the price of food had escalated to more than 80% compared with the same period in 2021.

After the government cut some subsidies, which caused a spike in prices of food staples, protests erupted across several provinces, which brought out the security forces, and resulted in the deaths of at least five people, while dozens were arrested.

Iranian officials acknowledge the right of citizens to protest, but will not allow the protests to evolve into chaos and lawlessness. Security forces in some cases used heavy-handed methods, which drew criticism from the west and Iranian opposition groups in the west. The Raisi government knew too well that western interests would be served if the protests were violent and disruptive to the country; therefore, they tried to manage the protests on a short leash.

Most countries are unwilling to trade or invest in Iran due to the U.S. sanctions. This handicapped Raisi and prevented his government from expanding and developing trade and foreign investment. Countries who might want to do business in Tehran are fearful of being cut off from trade with the U.S., but China was willing to buy a lot of Iranian oil.

Under Raisi, Iran increased oil exports to China, and China has also continued to invest in a broad range of Iranian industries, including oil and gas, lumber, and light manufacturing. By January 2022, Iran exported more than 700,000 barrels of oil per day, which was more than Iran exported before the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions in 2018.



Raisi set his eyes on developing ties with his Asian and Arab neighbors. His death came after a visit with the leader of Azerbaijan. Raisi's first trip was to Tajikistan, where he participated in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in September 2021. The regional economic and security bloc, led by China and Russia, accepted Iran's bid for membership 15 years after it applied. He pushed for trade with Central Asian countries, and by July 2022, he had traveled to Oman, Qatar, Russia, Tajikistan, and twice to Turkmenistan.

One of the most significant developments of Raisi while in office, was the expansion of ties to Russia despite the military operation of Ukraine. The Supreme Leader of Iran had issued a policy statement validating the Russian position in Ukraine. Basically saying, that given the U.S.-NATO threats to Russia in Ukraine, that Russia was justified in a military operation to prevent the western powers from setting up a military offensive position toward Russia within Ukraine.

When Putin visited Tehran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei justified Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "If you had not taken the helm, the other side [NATO] would have done so and initiated a war," he told Putin.

Raisi met Putin three times in the first seven months of 2022, and Russia has bought Iranian drones. Concerning oil, the two countries have cooperated as part of OPEC+ to try to keep oil prices high.

Raisi's foreign minister, **Hossein Amir-Abdollahian**, also died in the crash along with others. He received a PhD in international relations from the University of Tehran, and during his career at the foreign ministry, he was posted to Iraq and Bahrain and had developed expertise on issues facing the region. Following Raisi's directives, Amir-Abdollahian focused on improving relations with the Arab and Asian neighbors of Iran.

In August 2021, Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian participated in a regional conference in Baghdad, along with French President Emmanuel Macron. Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates also participated, with the goal of easing regional tensions. Iran continued to support an array of Shiite militias and political parties in Iraq.

In March 2023, China successfully brokered a reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The surprise detente between Iran and Saudi Arabia followed years of bitter rivalry that had destabilized several Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain.

When word broke that the Iranian helicopter was thought to have crashed, Saudi Arabia was one of the first nations to offer all help and support to Iran. Saudi Arabia's deputy minister of foreign affairs, [Waleed Elkhajji](#), on Tuesday offered condolences and sympathy to Iran following the deaths of President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and personally called upon the Iranian ambassador to the Kingdom, **Alireza Enayati**, at the Iranian embassy in Riyadh.

Last year's normalization of ties between the two regional powers paved the way for more direct flights. On April 22, the first group of [Iranian pilgrims flew to Medina in Saudi Arabia](#) for a ten-day religious pilgrimage for the first time after 9 years.

According to the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson,

"Based on the two countries' mutual willingness and negotiations carried out by their respective foreign ministers, the obstacles have been removed. The transportation of Hajj pilgrims to Saudi Arabia officially started today."

Iran has suffered from past helicopter accidents.

September 29, 1980 a military helicopter crashed killing several high-ranking military

officers, including the Defense Minister, **Mousa Namjo**.

August 16, 1980 the first Iranian President, **Abu al-Hasan bin Sadr**, was in a helicopter crash but survived.

In 1994, a helicopter crashed killing the head of the Iranian Air Force in Isfahan.

January 5, 1995, a helicopter crashed killing the head of the Iranian Air Force, and 10 other officers.

June 2, 2013, Mahmoud Ahmadinajad survived a helicopter crash.

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