

Power Struggle in Iran After the Assassinations

By [Prof. Akbar E. Torbat](#)

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On May 19, 2024, Iran's President, Ebrahim Raisi, met the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, at the Giz Galasi Dam along the two countries' borders to inaugurate the hydroelectric complex there. In his return en route to Tabriz, the helicopter carrying Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and other companions crashed. While the Islamic Republic's officials have refused to provide transparent information about the cause of the helicopter crash, speculations about it are still ongoing.

Some observers in Iran have hypothesized that Raisi's helicopter possibly crashed in a "deliberate accident." Government officials have indicated that the results of additional investigations will be reported soon. Yet, the spokesperson of the judicial branch recently dodged the reporters' questions regarding the latest report of the crash.

A day after the inauguration of the new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, on July 30, Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas's political office, was assassinated in Tehran. The official report by Tasnim reported that Haniyeh was killed by a short-range missile fired from outside the building. In contrast, on August 5, the Jewish Chronicle reported that Haniyeh's assassination was managed by an explosive device placed under his bed. Two Iranians recruited by the Mossad from the Ansar al-Mahdi security unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps planted the device.

After the assassination of Haniyeh, the possibility of an "intentional crash" of Raisi's helicopter has once again been raised. We must be very naïve to believe that the crash of the Raisi helicopter was an accident and had not been carefully planned.

Some Iranians referred to the friendly relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Israel, claiming a possibility of Israel's involvement in the crash. Israeli journalist Edi Cohen wrote about the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh on X social media and warned the Iranian authorities: "Did you understand who targeted the helicopter?" The Iranian Intelligence minister is traditionally a mullah who is chosen by Leader Ali Khamenei and commonly lacks professional experience and knowledge of espionage in the digital age. In 2022, Ali Yunesi, a former Intelligence Minister, warned that Mossad had infiltrated many parts of the country. Cases of intelligence failure have been reported on a few occasions. In 2017, Catherine Shakhdaman, a Jewish journalist disguised as a converted Shia, went to Iran and established friendly relations with some top government authorities in Tehran. She wrote some articles for the Iranian media and then left Iran. In 2022, it was reported that she had been a Mossad spy. Also, Ali Reza Akbari, a deputy defense minister, had been recruited by the British to leak certain sensitive information to them. Akbari was later convicted as a spy and was hanged in January 2023.

Even though most Iranians disliked Ebrahim Raisi for his role in the execution of about 5000

political prisoners in 1988, he succeeded in strengthening Iran's relations with the East. That was after his predecessor, Hassan Rouhani's rapprochement with the West and lifting of economic sanctions completely failed. Under the Raisi administration, Iran was admitted as a full member of SCO, and it joined BRICS. Masoud Pezeshkian, who succeeded Raisi, favors reviving rapprochement with the West.

Pezeshkian chose Mohammad Javad Zarif as the Strategic Vice President and Head of the Presidential Strategic Studies Center to select the nominees for his cabinet. By appointment of Zarif, reformists thought a cabinet could be formed in their favor to benefit from the possible removal of the sanctions. Zarif presented a list of the prospective cabinet nominees. However, only a few of those on the list were chosen after consultation with the Leader. Moreover, Zarif had become an ideal stooge of the American top Democrats who liked him to be a future leader in Iran. Fundamentalists (principalists) felt that Zarif's presence in the government would weaken their power and pushed for his removal. They used an interpretation of a law regarding employment in sensitive government positions to pressure him to resign. Zarif's children are American citizens, as they were born in the United States, which is related to that law. As a result, Zarif resigned from his position and said he would return to his university teaching job.

Currently, there is a power struggle between the two sides of the regime. The fundamentalists want to retaliate to punish Israel for the latest assassination, while the reformists insist on restraint and ask for the removal of the economic sanctions.

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Akbar E. Torbat is the author of "[Politics of Oil and Nuclear Technology in Iran](#)," Palgrave Macmillan (2020). Farsi translation of the book is available [here](#). He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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