

'Foremost issue'

Role of Iran's late president, foreign minister in Palestine



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PERSPECTIVE

Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian will be replaced following their shock helicopter crash deaths in the Varzeghan region.

While Iranians poured to the streets in their millions across the country to mourn the passing of the two, along with other senior officials, and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) held a moment of silence, their records on the question of Palestine are of great importance to highlight.

Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi (1960–2024)

Born in the Iranian city of Mashhad, a key religious location in the country and home to the Imam Reza shrine, Ebrahim Raisi was educated from around the age of 15 at the renowned Qom religious seminary and went on to study under several important Islamic scholars of the time.

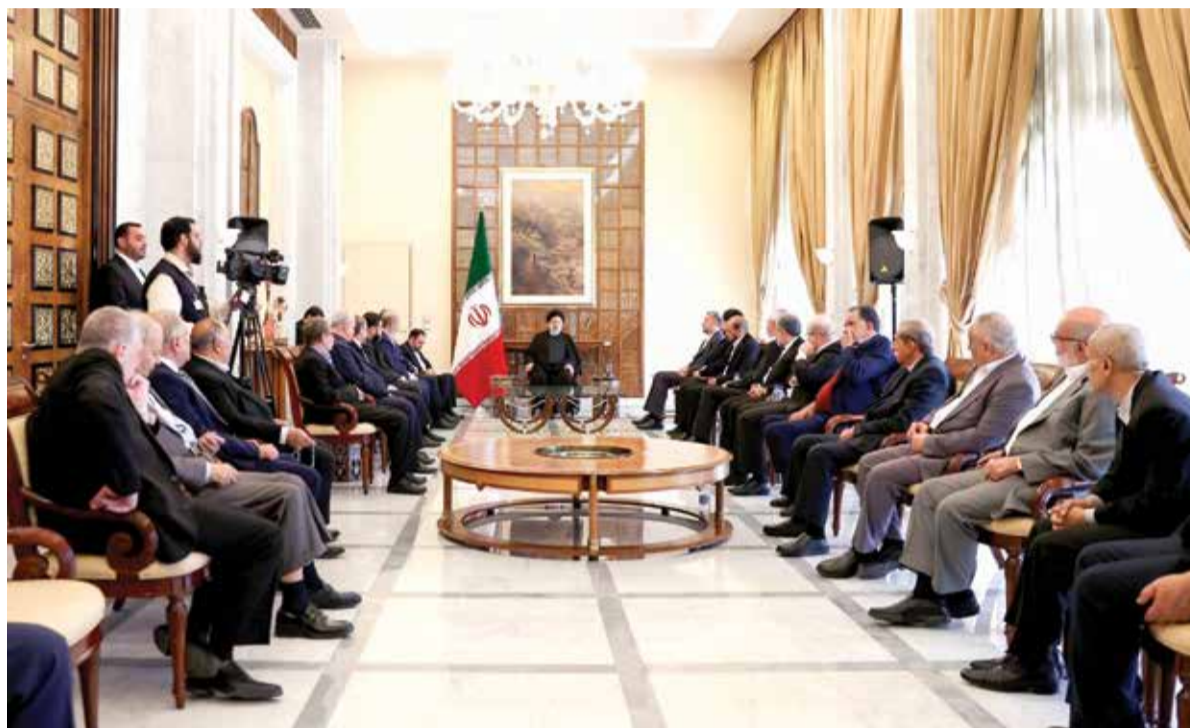
A child of a clerical family, Raisi would join the protests that culminated in the birth of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 when the Iranian people overthrew the UK-US-installed dictator, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

What is often not pointed out is the centrality of the Palestinian cause to the popular revolt that overthrew the tyrannical Iranian monarch, not only in terms of the references made to Palestine within the revolutionary movement itself but also in terms of the Palestine Liberation Organization's training of groups of revolutionaries.

Receiving his doctorate in Islamic Jurisprudence and Law at the Shahid Mottahari University, Ebrahim Raisi would quickly be promoted, aged 25, to be the deputy prosecutor of Tehran. Inside Iran, while there were a range of opposition parties and individual voices against him, he was seen in much of the country as a man of the people who would travel frequently to the poorest areas of the nation. For this reason, many speculated that he would potentially be in line to replace Iran's Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

When elected to power in 2021, Ebrahim Raisi ran as a religiously conservative candidate and won on a platform of economic reform. In Western media he was labeled a "hardliner" or "conservative", which had to do mostly with two key aspects of his orientation as a politician, his foreign policy approach and his religious approach. The term conservative in Iran is only befitting to the religio-social aspect, however, as those described with the term often pursue socialist economic policies and have little to do with conservatives in the West.

On the foreign policy front, Ebrahim Raisi was focused on an "Eastern pivot", leaving behind attempts to align Iran with the West. This meant building on Tehran's ties with Moscow and Beijing and joining the BRICS economic alliance and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).



Iran's late president Ebrahim Raisi (C) meets with Palestinian resistance leaders, commanders, and intellectuals in the Syrian capital, Damascus, on May 4, 2023, while foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian is sitting to Raisi's immediate left.
● mfa.ir



A truck carrying the coffin of the late Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi during a funeral in downtown Tehran, Iran, on May 22, 2024.
● MORTEZA NIKOUBAZL/NURPHOTO

The other key aspect of Iran's new foreign policy was adopting a more resolute stance towards the issue of regional resistance to Israel and US hegemony.

Iran, under Raisi, would focus on developing a stronger deterrence equation when it came to their "shadow war" with the Israelis. Tehran also advocated more frequently on behalf of the Palestinian people, developed its relationship with Hamas further, and sought to combat the US-planned Saudi-Israeli normalization deal that became a primary foreign policy goal until October 7.

After October 7, Ebrahim Raisi was the most resolutely pro-Palestinian voice at the Arab-Islamic summit that was triggered by the war in Gaza, calling on all nations involved to sanction Israel for their crimes against the Palestinian people and spoke in support of the armed struggle against the oc-

cupation.

It was also under president Raisi's rule that the Islamic Republic launched its first-ever direct attack against Israel from Iranian territory, which came in retaliation for Israel having bombed the consular segment of Iran's embassy in Damascus, Syria. Throughout the war on Gaza, Iran has been one of the most vocal states against Israel's genocide and has advanced its confrontational approach to Israel, whereby it coordinates with its allies Hezbollah, the PMU, and Ansarullah to aid the Palestinian resistance in Gaza.

During president Raisi's last speech, delivered in Azerbaijan, he turned his attention to the issue of Palestine and highlighted its uniting force between the people of Iran and Azerbaijan, declaring that "the Palestinian cause stands as the foremost issue of the Islamic world."

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (1964–2024)

Born in the city of Damghan, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian began his career by receiving a PhD in International Relations from The University of Tehran. He went on to build significant relationships throughout West Asia and would first take on government roles when Ali Larijani was the speaker of the Iranian Parliament. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian then became the Secretary-General of the Permanent Secretariat of the International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada, before becoming Managing Director of the 'Palestine Strategic Dialogue Quarterly', where he would serve as the lead editor.

He was also known for his close relationship with former leading Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps's

elite Quds Force. This relationship is said to have stemmed from Amir-Abdollahian's role at the Foreign Ministry as an Iraq expert, following the toppling of Saddam Hussein by the US military. When General Qassem Soleimani was designated the head of the Quds Force, it was said they would meet to discuss key regional issues.

General Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated in Baghdad by a US drone strike in 2020, is credited with having helped the Palestinian resistance develop strategies in order to effectively fight the Israeli military, the most prominent of which is said to be his role in the construction of the elaborate system of tunnels under the Gaza Strip.

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was also a professor at the Iranian Foreign Ministry's School of International Relations and had occupied the position of deputy foreign minister, during the government of former president Hassan Rouhani. He reportedly had a falling out with the serving foreign minister at the time, Javad Zarif, due to disagreement on the direction of Iran's foreign policy.

When Amir-Abdollahian became Iranian foreign minister in 2021, with the election of the Raisi government, he was presented throughout Western media as a "hardliner" on foreign policy issues.

A stern advocate of the Palestinian cause, he was viewed as posing a special threat to Israel and US regional ambitions, as he was known to be dedicated to the idea of what Iran calls its "Axis of Resistance". He had been involved in various meetings with the likes of Hezbollah Secretary-General Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah and had long known leaders within the Palestinian resistance too.

Contributing to president Ebrahim Raisi's approach, which was sternly in favor of ditching the West and building ties throughout the Global South, in addition to Russia and China, he is credited with playing a pivotal role in the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

When the war in Gaza began, Amir-Abdollahian indicated that there is a chance Iran could be drawn into the conflict if Israel launched a ground invasion of the besieged coastal enclave. Then, on October 14, he met with the political leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, in Doha.

In November, he also set up a meeting between Hamas politburo member Khalil Al-Hayya, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad's Secretary-General Ziad al-Nakhleh in Lebanon. He traveled to Lebanon a number of times during the war to coordinate with the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance factions.

Hamas described both Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian by stating that "these leaders supported the legitimate struggle of our people against the Zionist entity, provided valued support to the Palestinian resistance, and made tireless efforts in solidarity and support in all forums and fields for our people in the steadfast Gaza Strip during the Battle of Al-Aqsa Flood".

The full article first appeared on *The Palestine Chronicle*.