

Generally, Western media fail to represent every layer of Iranian society, often interviewing people in a biased and instrumental manner. I believe all perspectives should be relayed honestly and without judgment.

As the head of a consultancy organization that also researches Iranian issues, what is your opinion about the Islamic Republic of Iran and its trajectory in the world?

Undoubtedly, going back in history, Iran dramatically changed its allies after the Islamic Revolution. Decades past the Iran-Iraq war, I think it remains a pivotal moment in shaping Iran's geopolitical strategy. Attacked and isolated, Iran developed a strong sense of the need to protect its borders. Like major powers, Iran began working on multiple fronts: creating buffer zones by exerting influence along its borders, improving its military, and developing tactical strategies that build resilience for future confrontations.

In modern times, international isolation due to sanctions has driven Iran

to develop an indigenous industry, striving for self-sustainability and fostering regionalism. This approach has proven effective in alleviating economic pressure, as Iran has forged new partnerships with Eurasian countries, developed regional corridors, and established itself as a strategic hub.

Iran possesses immense untapped potential due to its resources and strategic geographical location, not to mention its diverse landscape, environment, and historical heritage. Despite sanctions, Iran has managed to be considered a major power on the global stage through a combination of military strength and regional networking strategies. If sanctions were lifted, Iran's potential would be further unlocked, though it would require investment and sustainable development to realize it fully.



Female journalists who flew from all across the world to participate in Iran's Khorshedd Media Festival mingle with Iranians on stage at the close of a day of the event in Mashhad, Iran, in September 2023. QUDS DAILY

You came to Iran last year and participated in some events. Tell us about your experience of attending these events.

My trip was an insightful experience that began with the Khorshedd Media Festival, which offered a valuable glimpse into the world of women in the media for international female journalists. The event featured experts from around the

globe discussing how women's roles in modern society have evolved and the challenges they face in balancing family, education, and careers.

As a woman from a Western country, I had the opportunity to meet Iranian women who live traditional lifestyles and understand their perspectives, which are rarely covered in my home

country. I approached them sincerely, aiming to learn about their opinions, values, and choices. An important highlight was attending a lecture by the late president Raisi's wife, who presented the government's view on women's issues. The second part of my trip focused on a different professional objective. The past year, I was working on a project called

'Persian Files,' which involved researching Iranian free trade-industrial zones. I was fortunate to secure an interview with the authorities of the Qeshm Free Zone on Qeshm Island, one of Iran's most significant free zones in the Persian Gulf. I spent a week exploring the investment environment developed by the Qeshm Free Zone Organization, including their

main goals and assets such as ports, industrial facilities, natural resources, eco-tourism, historical heritage, and geosites. The outcome of this visit was a detailed report that I shared with the Italian-Iranian Chamber of Commerce and other institutions, with the hope of fostering future relations between our countries.



Managing Director of Special Eurasia Silvia Boltuc (R) and Javad Hasheminejad, the secretary-general of Habilian Association, an Iranian human rights NGO, pose for a photo in front of a wall covered with information about terrorist activities of Mujahedeen Khalq Organization (MKO) in Iran, during their meeting in Mashhad, Iran, in 2023. IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/REUTERS

How do you evaluate Iran's regional policy during the presidency of the late Ebrahim Raisi? What do you think are its outstanding facets?

As my area of expertise is geopolitics, I will focus on highlighting the major achievements of Ebrahim Raisi's presidency specifically in this field.

Although the president did not solely shape the country's foreign policy, the Raisi government had distinct characteristics. Under president Raisi, indeed, Tehran pursued two foreign policies: regionalism and "Look to the East".

The first outcome of this strategy was Tehran's shift toward new alliances and the restoration of ties with some neighboring countries. Iran and Saudi Arabia re-established relations after years of tension. Notably, on May 25, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain also expressed his country's willingness to establish normal diplomatic, trade, and cultural relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although this occurred after the helicopter crash, I believe this achievement can be attributed to the Raisi presidency. It is also important to acknowledge that foreign minister Amir-Abdollahian

played a key role in Iran's diplomatic efforts to reshape its regional network of alliances.

The reintegration of Syria into the Arab League was another notable event, especially given Iran's strong alliance with the Syrian government. Syria had been a significant point of friction between Tehran and Riyadh. So, Damascus' return to the Arab League signaled a clear willingness among these major players to de-escalate tensions and build new relations for regional stability.

Talking about the Arab League, I should mention the renewed relations with Egypt, which could favor Iran's recent policy toward Africa. Despite initial optimism during Muslim Brotherhood's leadership over Egypt, differences emerged over Iran's support for Bashar al-Assad. The phone call on December 23, 2023, between president Raisi and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, to extend congratulations on al-Sisi's recent re-election, was welcomed as a new chapter in the relations between the two countries.

As for Africa, president Ebrahim Raisi embarked on a three-country trip to Africa in mid-July 2023, marking the first time an Iranian

president has undertaken such a visit in over 11 years.

As demonstrated by Turkey being the only NATO country to hang the flag at half-mast after the helicopter incident that killed president Raisi and his companions, Ankara and Tehran are also seeking closer ties. It is reasonable to believe that the Palestinian issue has led several Sunni-majority countries to enhance their cooperation with the Islamic Republic.

As a result of the Look to the East policy, Iran has cultivated closer relations with Russia and China as well. The message of condolence from the Russian president following Raisi's death clearly showed the high level of cooperation between Moscow and Tehran, encompassing initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and joint naval drills. Meanwhile, China brokered the normalisation of relations with Saudi Arabia and invested significantly in key Iranian infrastructure projects, such as the Persian Gulf Bridge.

In recent years, Iran's policies have also brought Tehran closer to Central Asia, the Caucasus, and India, all of which are attracted by Iran's strategic location and its ports.

What would you like to say to Iranian women as someone who has been able to meet them up close and bridge the gap between fiction and facts?

When I talk to European colleagues who have also had the chance to meet Iranian women during trips or work meetings, the most common remark is their amazement at the Iranian women's high level of education. Generally, they are seen as strong and well-equipped. My own experience not only confirms this im-

pression but also reveals that they are extremely kind and welcoming. Even though my time in Iran was brief, I have developed significant friendships with women from various segments of Iranian society over time. These inspiring individuals continuously teach me new things.

Given the importance of family in Iranian culture, women should know that they are central to their society's tapestry. Additionally, their contributions in sports, science, and academia are becoming increasingly prominent for outside viewers.



People stroll by a lake in Iran as Iranian flags on strings wave in the wind. SHARGH

By listing all these restoration or improvements in ties with other countries, one may get the impression that Iran put all its eggs in one basket under Raisi.

That can't be further from the truth. For example, undoubtedly, under Raisi, Iran has increased its indigenous military production, particularly of drones. This development has raised concerns in Western circles, but it has also enhanced Iran's capability to export arms and bolstered its resilience in the face of heavy sanctions in this sector.

Other notable successes of Raisi were the approval of Iran's bid for membership in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

as a full member, as well as the signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which represents a significant milestone in Iran's regional economic integration.

Defining Raisi's actions regarding relations with the West is more challenging. Even though nuclear negotiations were being handled by the current Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri, no agreement has been reached yet.

The Israeli military intervention in Gaza has further strained relations, with Iran supporting the resistance axis and the US and its European allies steadfastly backing Israel. However, while the Palestinian issue has distanced some Western actors from Iran, it

has also brought some regional powers closer to Tehran. The conflict in Ukraine and Iran's close ties with Russia have further soured relations with Brussels.

Still, according to many analysts, under Raisi's government, Tehran, while not avoiding negotiation tables, has essentially turned away from the West and generally sought to redirect the country's future relations towards the East and the so-called Global South. In general, Iran has been one of the countries advocating for a multipolar order of world powers, focusing more on forging new alliances during this historical shift rather than meeting Western demands regarding its foreign policies.