



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXII / 2021

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## Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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## IRAN 2021: THE YEAR OF TRANSITION

*Luciano Zaccara*

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*The election of Ebrahim Raisi as the new president of Iran in June has been the most significant development in Iran during 2021. It represented the end of an era -the reformist-pragmatist one- and the beginning of a new one controlled by the conservative establishment. This article analyses the domestic and international implications of such transition, including assessing Rouhani's performance and legacy. It also analyses the evolution of the Iranian economy, still marked by the sanctions and the Covid-19 pandemic. Besides, it describes and assesses the evolution of the nuclear negotiations transferred from the outgoing to the new administration.*

KEYWORDS - Rouhani; Raisi; Khamenei; JCPOA; COVID-19.

### *1. Introduction*

The year under review included the transition from the pragmatist administration of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) to the conservative one of Ebrahim Raisi (2021-). During this year, the Iranian economy and domestic and foreign policies continued to be heavily marked by the impact of the still active United States sanctions and the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some signals of improvement were visible throughout 2021. However, they were not necessarily linked with the new administration but with the gradual recovery of the world economy post-COVID-19.

Ebrahim Raisi's election is the most relevant political development reviewed in this article. It is understandable that the limited competition and unsurprising result, added to the lowest participation rate ever in presidential elections, dilute the practicality of any in-depth analysis. However, a section in this article is dedicated to analysing the results and the implications for the political system. While it is not the objective of this article to analyse the whole period of the Rouhani presidency, it has been considered appropriate to assess the overall performance of his administration. Therefore, this article dedicates a short section to review Rouhani's main achievements and failures.

The article also looks at the transition between the two administrations by focussing on foreign policy and nuclear negotiations throughout the year.

The end of Rouhani's term indeed represents the end of an era in which the reformists and pragmatists participated actively in politics and

had relevance in policy making through the control of the presidential office with Khatami (1997-2005) and Rouhani (2013-2021). With Ebrahim Raisi's ascent to the presidency a new era has started in Iran, in which a more homogeneous political arena is becoming visible, controlled by the several conservative factions within the Islamic Republic.

## 2. *Economy and society*

The Iranian economy in 2021 continued to be marked by the US unilateral sanctions and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The financial-economic situation seemed to improve due to the gradual recovery of the world's economic activity and the beginning of the dialogue to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which facilitated Iran's steady recovery of oil exports. However, this recovery was not transferred to the whole population. The Iranians continued to face the difficulties of a shrinking job market and the COVID-19 restrictions.

### 2.1. *The financial-economic situation*

The economic indicators in 2021 were not as adverse as the previous years, which were marked by the combined effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the United States-imposed sanctions.<sup>1</sup> According to World Bank estimations compiled by Statista, the Iranian GDP growth rate for 2021 was 2.46%, following the already positive revised data of 2020 (3.39%). Based on data provided by the Central Bank of Iran, the same estimations suggest a sustained increase of around 2% for the coming years.<sup>2</sup>

Due to continued economic constraints triggered by the still active US sanctions, the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and unsuccessful economic policy implemented by the Rouhani administration, the inflation rate remained within the two digits throughout the year, with figures that reached 49.5% as of April. While inflation declined since then, table 1 shows that the year ended with a still high inflation rate of 35.2%. As a result, the final average annual inflation rate was around 44%.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth mentioning that high prices and inflation have been at the root of the protests in Iran in December 2017 and November 2019.<sup>4</sup> These

1. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran 2019-2020: The Double Impact of Crippling Sanctions and the COVID-19 Pandemic,' *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2021, pp. 479-503.

2. See Statista estimated GDP growth (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/294301/iran-gross-domestic-product-gdp-growth>); and Central Bank of Iran (<http://www.cbi.ir>).

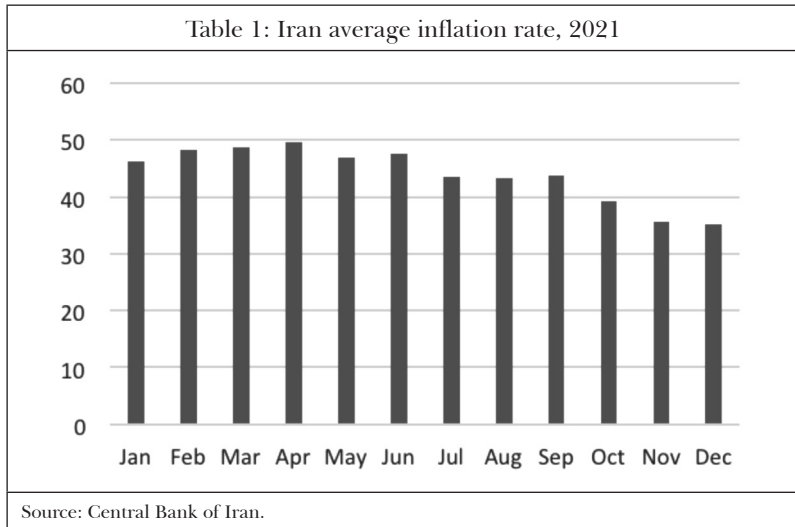
3. See available data at 'Consumer Price Index', *Central Bank of Iran*, and 'Iran Inflation Rates,' *Trading Economics*.

4. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran 2018: The Year of Living Dangerously,' *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIX/2019, pp. 393-414.



protests represented a call for attention to the authorities concerning the government and political establishment's inefficacy to provide social justice, job opportunities, and fair salaries to most Iranians. The latest *Iranpoll* survey, released in October 2021, perfectly reflects these economic grievances among the Iranian population. When asked about the «single most important issue and challenge that [Iran] faced that President Raisi should try to address», the first response was «inflation and high prices» (23%), followed by «alleviating poverty» (19%), and «unemployment» (13%). Undoubtedly, economic concerns remain the most important for the Iranian people, while «sanctions» were only mentioned by 6% of the interviewed.<sup>5</sup>

Table 1: Iran average inflation rate, 2021



The dollar-rial exchange remained, as usual, a primary source of concern for both the government and the people, considering the exchange rate continue to raise throughout the year. The dollar market in Iran has always been very volatile, reflecting the impact that external, regional and domestic developments have on the Iranian economy, affecting private citizens in particular. This applies mainly to the unofficial free market that determines the «real» price of the dollar. However, there is also a subsidized official market controlled by the government, allowing a cheaper rate for imports and travel abroad. Since 2018, when the dollar was around 60,000 rials in the unofficial market, the official rate has been set at 42,000 rials,

5. 'Iranian public opinion as Raisi takes the stage', *Iranpoll.com*, 15 October 2021.

which is currently around a seventh of the real price.<sup>6</sup> The widening gap between the two markets has made it difficult for the authorities to properly regulate the discrepancies and price rises of both domestically produced and imported goods. This situation has also generated strong speculation and corruption as well as panic among private citizens and businessmen.

The evolution of dollar exchange in Iran is often unrelated to economic measures taken by the Iranian government but to people's expectations over some external developments such as, for instance, former US President Trump's decisions or even tweets regarding Iran. Although those decisions would eventually impact the Iranian economy in the mid or long term, the reaction of the dollar market is immediate. This has forced, on several occasions, the government to suspend the exchange operations in banks and exchange offices due to the volatility and uncertainty of the markets.

In order to tackle those market discrepancies and volatility, Ebrahim Raisi's new administration initiated to discuss the elimination of the subsidies to the dollar market affecting mainly the import of medical products and other essential goods in September.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, as early as November, the minister of Economy, Ehsan Khandouzi, had to put the measure on hold, due to its rejection from the Iranian Majlis and the negative impact that this measure could have had on the country's imports.<sup>8</sup>

January 2021 started with the US dollar at 258,500 rials, and on two occasions along the year, the price went down to 214,500 (18 January) and 209,000 (5 May). The peak was reached on 6 December, with 311,000 rials per dollar, and the year ended with the dollar at 299,700 rials. While the increase in the exchange rate was much lower than in previous years, the final rise throughout the year was 15%.<sup>9</sup>

The evolution of the unemployment rate, according to the official figures, deserves a short analysis. While in 2020, the official unemployment rate was 11.18%, the four trimesters of 2021 showed a decreasing trend, with 9.7%, 8.8%, 9.6%, and 8.9%, respectively.<sup>10</sup> According to the government, it was the lowest rate in 25 years and the first time, during the same period, when a single-digit rate had been reached. However, according to the other economic indicators, there were no visible signs of improvement in the Iranian economy which could justify this decrease. Moreover, there were still constraints coming from the COVID-19 pandemic and the US

6. Amir Paivar, 'Iran sets single foreign exchange rate to rescue currency', *BBC News*, 10 April 2018.

7. 'Reservations about Future of Currency Subsidy Policy', *Financial Tribune*, 28 September 2021.

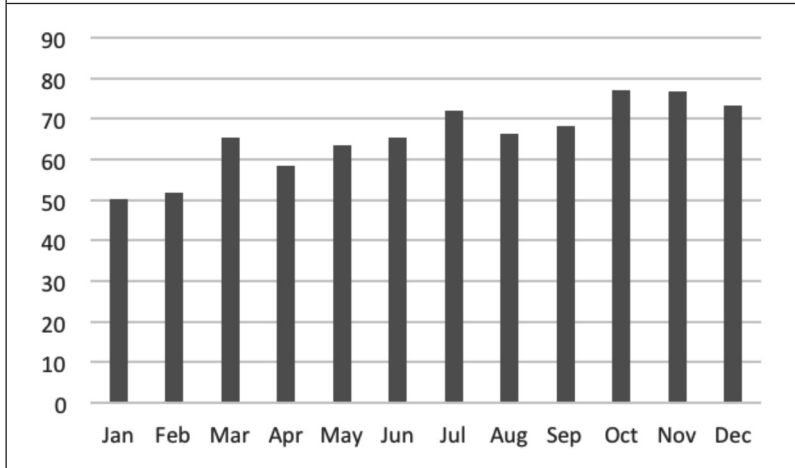
8. 'Iran: Ending Forex Subsidy Policy Is Put on Hold', *Financial Tribune*, 26 November 2021.

9. 'Iranian Rial Exchange Rates', *Bonbast*.

10. 'Iran Unemployment Rate', *Trading Economics*.

sanctions. In fact, the pandemic caused many Iranians to leave the job market, resulting in the reduction of the active population. The growing population, combined with the economic recession and the shrinking job market, indicated a job crisis that was deepening due to the COVID-19.<sup>11</sup>

Table 2: Iranian heavy oil monthly average price (US\$/barrel, 2021)



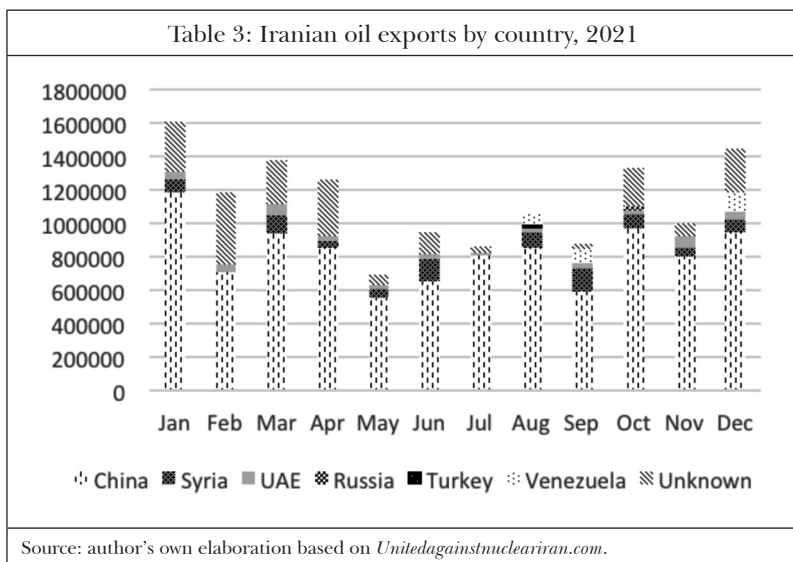
Source: author's own elaboration based on the *Oilprice.com* information.

On the positive side, the effects of the worldwide economic recovery started to become visible translating into the rise of the price of Iranian oil in the international markets and the country's exports. In January, the Iranian Heavy Oil was exported at an average price of US\$ 50.17 per barrel, reaching US\$ 77.14 US per barrel in November and keeping a stable increase throughout the year.<sup>12</sup> It was a better performance than anticipated in the government budget for the 2021 fiscal year (starting in March), which estimated a price of US\$ 43 per barrel and set an average export rate of 2.3 million barrels per day.<sup>13</sup>

11. 'Unemployment hits lowest rate in 25 years', *Tehran Times*, 8 January 2022; and Bahram Khodabandeh, 'Number Crunching: The Truth Behind Iran's «Single-Digit» Unemployment Rate', *Iran Wire*, 14 May 2021.

12. 'Oil Price Chart', *Oilprice.com* (<https://oilprice.com/oil-price-charts>).

13. Henry Rome, 'Iran in 2021: The Economy', *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 15 December 2021 (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/dec/15/Iran-2021-economy>).



Since the re-establishment of the US unilateral sanctions against Iran, following President Trump's decision to pull out from the JCPOA, Iranian oil exports are difficult to monitor, as most of them, bypassing the US imposed constraints, go undetected to normal statistical data collections. However, independent and partisan organizations and companies produce credible calculations based on satellite images and tankers information that allows researchers to compile enough data to assess the overall Iranian oil exports throughout the year. Based on those calculations, it is safe to say that Iran was able to sell an average of 1.13 million barrels per day during 2021, half of the 2.3 expected by the government. As shown in Table 3, the leading destination for Iranian oil has been again China, with an average of 818,000 barrels per day, followed very far by Syria (87,000) and the UAE (37,000). The other three countries that these sources identified were Venezuela,<sup>14</sup> Russia, and Turkey.<sup>15</sup>

Iran is considered a rentier economy that relies heavily on oil and gas as a main source of state revenues. However, the authorities have been trying to reverse that trend, as the sanctions against the Iranian oil industry started in 2006 and the volatility of oil prices drastically affect state expenditures. Therefore, since the Mahmood Ahmadinejad administration

14. Marianna Parraga & Deisy Buitrago, 'Iranian condensate cargo begins discharging in Venezuela – sources', *Reuters*, 27 September 2021.

15. *United against Nuclear Iran* (<https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/tanker-tracker>).

(2005-2013), followed by those of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) and Ebrahim Raisi, efforts at fiscal reform have been made, with the implementation of VAT and measures to prevent tax evasion. While in 2008, oil and gas revenues represented 55% of the state income, their share has been consistently reduced since then. The last budget submitted by President Rouhani for the 2021-22 fiscal year included just 25% of the income from oil and gas; the remainder was produced by miscellaneous taxation (24%), and sale of financial assets (31%). On its part, the first budget submitted to the Majlis by President Raisi increased the reliance on taxation to 35% while keeping oil income at 25% and reducing the sale of financial assets to 20%. According to some, the Raisi budget is an assumption that the sanctions will not be lifted, at least for the time being.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.2. *The evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to strike Iran throughout 2021. Official figures provided by the Ministry of Health and compiled by *Worldmeters* showed that Iran passed through six waves of contagions since the breakout of the pandemic in February 2020. In April and August 2021, the fourth and fifth waves hit the country producing peaks that reached 496 and 709 daily deaths, respectively. By the end of the year, Iran had registered over 6 million cases and more than 130,000 deaths.<sup>17</sup>

Criticism about the lack of transparency in the information released and the scarcity of hospital beds was combined with the controversy regarding the vaccination policy. On 8 January, Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei tweeted, following a public speech, that «Imports of U.S. and British vaccines into the country are forbidden... They're completely untrustworthy. It's not unlikely they would want to contaminate other nations.»<sup>18</sup> The tweet was later removed by the social network due to a violation of its COVID-19 rules. This initial prohibition complicated the effective coordination between the Iranian government on the one hand and the international organizations and foreign governments on the other, within the international COVAX mechanism to provide vaccines, mainly Pfizer, Moderna, and Astra Zeneca, produced in western countries. Nonetheless, Iran tried to diversify the provision of vaccines, signing different agreements with China, Russia, and Cuba, as well as producing its own vaccines, the main one being COVIran Barekat, produced by the state-affiliated Shifa Pharmed Industry. Iran also tried to develop other nine vaccines, some in cooperation with Australia and Cuba. The Iranian Ministry of Health announced on 19

16. Henry Rome, 'Iran in 2021: The Economy'.

17. 'Iran', *Worldometers* (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/iran/>).

18. Parisa Hafezi, 'Iran leader bans import of U.S., UK COVID-19 vaccines, demands sanctions end', Reuters, 8 January 2021.

January 2021 the multi-stage national vaccination plan that defined four phases free of charge that prioritized healthcare workers, people with certain health conditions, and older people.<sup>19</sup> However, the vaccination trend was not as quick as expected due to various reasons, including the official position regarding the US and UK produced vaccines abovementioned. At the end of the period under review, there were 12 vaccines approved to be used in Iran, including the three produced in the country and the Oxford/Astra Zeneca and Janssen-Johnson & Johnson, which were approved in May and September, respectively, but produced in and imported from South Korea, Russia and Italy.<sup>20</sup>

By August, when Raisi assumed office, only 13 million vaccine doses had been imported through the COVAX mechanism by the Red Crescent and delivered to the Health Ministry. Besides, just 3% of the population was fully vaccinated with jabs coming from the COVAX scheme, or directly imported by the government, or produced locally. However, the pace of vaccination increased drastically during the summer, reaching more than 25% in October and almost 70% by December, although other sources dispute this figure.<sup>21</sup>

In September, President Raisi stated that enough doses had been stockpiled and that local production had increased; therefore, Iran suspended the import of vaccines from abroad as effective from October.<sup>22</sup> By that month, almost 93 million vaccine doses had been imported by Iran, 90% of them coming from China.<sup>23</sup> By the same month, Shifa had produced 16 million doses of Barekat COVIran vaccine and delivered 7.5 million of them to the Ministry of Health, and submitted a file to the World Health Organization to have its vaccine approved internationally.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Domestic Politics

Undoubtedly, the most relevant domestic political event that took place in 2021 was the victory of the conservative Ebrahim Raisi in the 18 June

19. 'Iran: Government Mismanagement Compounds Covid-19 Crisis', *Human Rights Watch*, 19 August 2021.

20. 'Iran', *Covid-19 Vaccine Tracker* (<https://covid19.trackvaccines.org/country/iran-islamic-republic-of/>).

21. 'How the World Aids Iran on COVID-19', *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 13 October 2021; and 'Iran', *Live COVID-19 Vaccination Tracker* (<https://covidvax.live/>).

22. Maziar Motamedi, 'Iran imposes restrictions on unvaccinated in new COVID plan', *Al Jazeera English*, 6 December 2021.

23. 'How the World Aids Iran on COVID-19', *The Iran Primer*.

24. 'Production of 16 million doses of Barekat vaccine to date / Submission of documents for obtaining a license from the World Health Organization' (in Farsi), *Tasnim News Agency*, 18 October 2021.

presidential election. With his victory, the pragmatic era that had lasted eight years reached an end, leaving its turn to a new one controlled by the conservative factions and with the reformists and pragmatists outside the picture, presumably, for the long term.

### 3.1. *The balance of Rouhani's era*

Before analysing the election and its implications, it is worth briefly assessing Rouhani's achievements and legacy. Since the beginning of his tenure in August 2013, the main priority of his administration had been to solve the nuclear issue, with the aim to achieve the removal of sanctions and the revival of the economy. With the signature of the preliminary nuclear agreement in November 2013 and the JCPOA in 2015, Rouhani claimed the most important achievement in his eight years in office. However, neither Iran nor Rouhani saw many benefits from the deal, despite Iran breaking the ostracism suffered by the country since 2006.

Nonetheless, solving the nuclear issue was not the only item in Rouhani's electoral programs for both presidential terms. A research project based in Toronto, called Rouhani Meter, monitored Rouhani's accomplishment in fulfilling his electoral promises throughout his eight years as president. The project selected one hundred promises made in either or both electoral campaign, and divided them into four categories: foreign policy, economy, domestic policy, and socio-cultural matters. The monitoring process classified the fulfilment of those promises according to a six-stage scale: achieved; compromised; in progress; not achieved; stalled; and inactive. A final report of the project, published the day after Raisi assumed office, on 6 August, showed a very disappointing final performance of the Rouhani administration. Only eight promises were marked as «achieved», while 12 more were «compromised», meaning that they were achieved but not as initially planned. The remaining 80 promises were «not achieved» for different reasons.

The report highlighted that the JCPOA, although «achieved», was later converted into a failure by the eventual US withdrawal from the deal. The report also pointed out that the final list of recorded achievements had to do with social and cultural issues promised by Rouhani to rectify the backward measures taken by his predecessor Ahmadinejad.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be unfair to claim that Rouhani failed to deliver on his promises without assessing the obstacles he faced along the road. His mandate started conditioned by a narrow victory margin and the need to avoid confrontations with the clerical establishment or Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Also, in the second term, Rouhani clearly positioned himself to confront the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which reduced his power share in foreign policy decisions and actions. However,

25. See *Rouhani Meter*, at <https://rouhanimeter.com/en/>.

the assassination on 3 January 2020 of the IRGC Quds commander Qasem Soleimani by a US drone, converted Rouhani, for many Iranians, into a traitor because of his direct negotiations with the US. Moreover, Rouhani's initiatives started to be blocked after the legislative elections of 2020 due to the conservative landslide victory and the de facto disappearance of the reformist and pragmatist factions in the Majlis.<sup>26</sup> External events beyond Rouhani's capacity also represented an obstacle. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought to the ground any reform initiatives in the socio-economic, domestic, or international fields.

### 3.2. *The new Iranian president: Ebrahim Raisi*

As many in the scholarly and policy-making community expected, no surprise happened. The engineered electoral process of 18 June 2021 (on which more below) achieved its goal: the victory of the conservative clerical-political establishment's candidate, Ebrahim Raisi. Since 1993, when Hashemi Rafsanjani achieved almost unopposed victory, the political establishment<sup>27</sup> could not guarantee its candidate's victory. The lack of agreement within the traditional conservative factions and the emergence of non-expected charismatic candidates, such as Mohammad Khatami (1997), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005), or Hassan Rouhani (2013), contributed to its failure to achieve the presidency in six presidential elections. In June 2021, however, the Guardian Council eliminated all those candidates that could have endangered Raisi's victory; the result was that the core conservative factions claimed the presidency, the most determinant elective institution in the country.

Even though the conservatives, with Raisi's victory, have clinched their control of most of the elective and non-elective governmental institutions, it does not mean the intra-elite power struggle will disappear. However, it might facilitate reaching decisions in domestic and foreign policy during Raisi's term.

Ebrahim Raisi, formerly the head of the Judiciary (March 2019 - until June 2021), has occupied many core positions in the Islamic Republic institutional framework. Prosecutor in the city of Karaj since 1981, Raisi was later promoted deputy prosecutor general in Tehran (1985), then

26. The Conservative factions claimed at least 230 out of 290 seats in 2020 Legislative elections. See Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran 2019-2020: The Double Impact of Crippling Sanctions and the COVID-19 Pandemic,' *op.cit.*, p. 491.

27. The Iranian political establishment includes a combination of elected and non-elected governmental institutions (Leadership, Guardians Council, Assembly of Experts, Expediency Council, National Security Council) plus non-governmental or para-governmental institutions and interest groups (IRGC, the Bonyads, political factions), which are either led by or aligned with the Supreme Leader and his first clerical allegiance circle.



deputy head of the Judiciary (2004-2014) and finally general prosecutor of Iran (2014-2016). He was also director of the Astan-e Qods Razavi Foundation in Mashad (2016-2019); member of the Assembly of Experts (since his election in 2006 as the South Khorasan province representative); and head of the General Inspectorate (1994-2004). His background and education are mainly those of a religious jurist, achieved primarily at Qom seminaries. Although Raisi's official biography claims that he is an *ayatollah*,<sup>28</sup> his clerical credentials are contested by many who claim that he should be considered just as *hojat-ol-eslam*<sup>29</sup> – one echelon below that of *ayatollah* in the hierarchical Shia clerical structure.<sup>30</sup> He was included in the US Executive Order 13876<sup>31</sup> of 24 June 2019, which designated Iranian government officials preventing free and fair elections. Raisi could, eventually, be investigated due to his alleged participation in the mass executions of 1988, according to the UN Humans Rights Rapporteur Javaid Rehman.<sup>32</sup>

Even though the supreme leadership is the most powerful position in Iran, he who occupies the presidency is not devoid of power and, at least since 1997, has had a somewhat high impact on foreign policy. Khatami, Ahmadinejad and Rouhani impressed their mark on Iran's foreign policy, generated different international behaviours and diplomatic initiatives, and provoked different and opposed reactions among the neighbouring countries and big powers. Similarly, also Raisi's term in office would have domestic and international implications due to his background, style and the circumstances surrounding his victory and tenure as president. According to many, Raisi could be the chosen successor of Ali Khamenei in the republic's leadership. This alleged long-term goal, pointed out by experts as early as 2017,<sup>33</sup> generated a considerable debate during that year's presidential elections when Rouhani was re-elected, defeating Raisi.<sup>34</sup> Besides, Raisi's aspiration may condition his domestic and international political perfor-

28. The Official Biography of Ebrahim Raisi is available at <https://raisi.ir>.

29. Alex Vatanka, 'The Supreme Leader's Apprentice Is Running for President', *Foreign Policy*, 12 April 2017.

30. For more detailed information on the hierarchical structure of the Shia clergy, see *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, available at <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/shiite-doctrine-ii-hierarchy-emamiya>.

31. Available at <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm912>.

32. Stephanie Nebehay, 'U.N. expert backs probe into Iran's 1988 killings, Raisi's role', *Reuters*, 29 June 2021.

33. E.g., Sanam Vakil & Hossein Rassam, 'Iran's Next Supreme Leader: The Islamic Republic after Khamenei', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 3, 2017, pp. 76-86; 'A Raisi presidential win may be his undoing as future Supreme Leader', *Atlantic Council*, 1 June 2021; Ali Alfoneh, 'Is Raisi Iran's Supreme Leader in Waiting? Whither Iran?', *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Winter 2022.

34. Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran 2017: From Rouhani's Reelection to the December Protests', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVIII/2018, pp. 387-410.

mance, as he needs to show the political establishment and the Iranians at large that he deserves that position and is the right person to lead the republic after Khamenei's demise.

### 3.3. *The Interpretation of the Electoral Results*

More than ever before, the campaign, the electoral process, and their result have been under international scrutiny due to a candidate's selection process, which cleared the way for Raisi to win without significant opposition from reformist, pragmatist, or moderate conservative camps.<sup>35</sup> The low turnout predictions were somehow fulfilled,<sup>36</sup> leaving little room for an in-depth analysis of the electoral process *per se*. However, any election held in Iran since 1979 is not devoid of political significance; in particular this presidential electoral process deserves to be analysed in detail.

In the 2021 presidential election, the already controversial vetting process, conducted by the Guardian Council in every electoral process, was made even more controversial by two details worth of being mentioned. First, for the first time since 1979, the list of approved candidates was leaked two days before being officially released by the Guardian Council. Considering the very controlled Iranian press environment, the fact that the leak was published by the Revolutionary Guards affiliated Fars News Agency<sup>37</sup> raised the suspicions that the Guards were pressuring the Guardian Council to prevent the approval of any candidate who could represent a threat to Raisi's victory. Second, once the official list with the seven approved candidates was released by the Guardian Council, it proved to be so unbalanced towards the conservatives that even Raisi asked the Guardian Council to reconsider accepting other candidates from the other political trends to make the elections competitive enough.<sup>38</sup>

The list included seven names: five from the conservative faction (Ebrahim Raisi; Mohsen Rezaei; Said Jalili; Alireza Zakani; and Amir Hosen Ghazizadeh), and two from the reformist-pragmatist camp (Mohsen Mehr Alizadeh and Abdul Nasser Hemmati). Apart from Raisi none of them

35. Patrick Wintour, 'Iran's leadership accused of fixing presidential election', *The Guardian*, 25 May 2021; 'Tehran hard-liner council bans leading centrists from presidential race', *Al-Monitor*, 25 May 2021.

36. For detailed information regarding low turnout predictions, see Luciano Zaccara, Twitter posts, 17 June 2021, <https://twitter.com/LucianoZaccara/status/1405528307832037380>; Twitter posts, 14 June 2021, 14:16, <https://twitter.com/LucianoZaccara/status/1404397220150054912>; Twitter posts, 13 June 2021, 13:18, <https://twitter.com/LucianoZaccara/status/1404020250820100097>; and Tavvana, Daniel, Twitter posts, 20 June, 2021, 2:55, <https://twitter.com/danieltavvana/status/1406400203717025802>.

37. 'The final names of the presidential candidates' (in Farsi), *Fars News Agency*, 24 May 2021.

38. 'Raisi: I am consulting to make the presidential election scene more competitive' (in Farsi), *Tasnim News Agency*, 25 May 2021.

had any popular support nor were known enough to attract considerable numbers of votes to endanger Raisi's victory.

Within this electoral frameset, the final results show that out of 59,310,307 registered voters, 28,989,529 took their presidential ballot papers at the polling stations and got their voting stamps. However, only 28,750,736 cast their ballots (238,793 did not cast them for some reason). There were also 100,231 uncollected invalid ballots in the ballot boxes, reducing the number of collected votes to 28,650,505. Out of them, 3,740,688 were blank and invalid votes – which, in the Iranian electoral system, are considered as belonging to the same category – with a final count of valid votes of 24,909,817. Adding all categories, non-valid votes reached 14.07%, the highest proportion ever in Iranian presidential elections. Considering the first figure – voters who went to the polling stations and took their presidential ballot paper – the participation rate was 48.88%. However, the several invalid and blank votes may represent an intentional message to the Iranian establishment, protesting the lack of representative candidates. Thus, if only valid votes are counted, they would represent just 42% of the voters, close to the pre-electoral opinion polls conducted, mainly by ISPA Polling.<sup>39</sup>

The final votes obtained by the four candidates who run, after the withdrawal of three of them a few days before the election, was as follows:

Candidate	Votes obtained	%
Ebrahim Raisi	18,021,945	62.16%
Mohsen Rezaei	3,440,835	11.86%
Abdolnaser Hemmati	2,443,387	8.42%
Hussein Ghazizadeh	1,003,650	3.46%

Source: Ministry of Interior, Islamic Republic of Iran

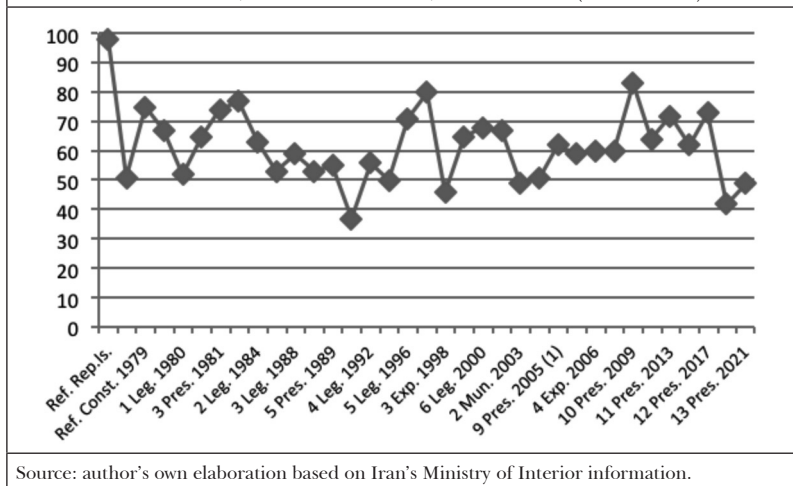
Of course, the official percentage of votes attributed to every candidate was taken from the first figure – namely the 28,989,529 voters who attended the polling stations and took their ballot papers from the electoral officials. There are several important remarks that can be extracted from these figures.

First, these were the presidential elections with the lowest turnout since 1980, namely 48.88%. However, it was not the lowest turnout registered in the Islamic Republic's history. Three previous electoral processes had a lower participation rate. The Assembly of Experts elections of 1990

39. ISPA Polling, Twitter posts, 17 June 2021, 22:12, [https://twitter.com/ispa\\_polling/status/1405604322180804609](https://twitter.com/ispa_polling/status/1405604322180804609).

registered a 37% turnout, the lowest ever. In addition, the Assembly of Experts election of 1998 had a 46% turnout, and the Legislative elections of 2020, a 42% turnout. Besides, the Municipal elections of 2003 registered the participation of 49% of the electorate, very similar to what has taken place in the 2021 elections. While none of the previous presidential elections registered turnouts below 50%, several approached that symbolic threshold, in 1985 (53.9%), 1989 (55.9%), and 1993 (50.8%). Low turnout, therefore, has not been an uncommon feature in the electoral processes of republican Iran. Nonetheless, the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic, which includes all the above-mentioned elective institutions – Presidency, Majlis, Assembly of Experts, and Municipal Councils – remained functional, and no implications were visible in terms of lack of legitimacy or authority of such institutions, despite the low turnout. Most important, and despite the criticism expressed regarding the alleged illegitimate character of some Iranian electoral processes, the governmental agencies resulting from such elections were recognized as legitimate interlocutors by other state actors and international organizations during, for instance, nuclear negotiations. The same has happened with the ministers appointed by president Raisi.

Table 5: Iran, electoral turnout, all elections (1980-2021)



The second remark concerns the different categories of invalid votes abovementioned, which totalled 4,079,712 – namely, as above mentioned, 238,793 votes that were not cast, 100,231 uncollected invalid ballots in the ballot boxes, and 3,740,688 blank and invalid votes. This figure, totalling 14.07% of the voters, is an even higher quota of votes than those obtained by the second candidate in these elections – Rezaei, who obtained 11.86%

of the votes. The previous highest proportion of invalid votes was in the first round of the 2005 election, with 1,224,882 nullified votes (4.17%). As already hinted, this unprecedented proportion of invalid ballots represents a direct message to the Iranian political establishment regarding the Iranians' disappointment with the political elites, including the Rouhani administration. On the one hand, even though Raisi did not compete with any strong candidate, he could secure neither a massive turnout nor a landslide victory. The average proportion obtained by the winning candidate in the previous twelve elections was 72.63%; instead, Raisi got, according to the official count, 62.16%. On the other hand, the candidate theoretically heir to the Rouhani administration and some reformist groups could not attract those voters who wanted to avoid Raisi's victory. Instead, they preferred their votes to be counted as invalid or abstain. While expectations existed that candidates such as Ali Larijani or Mostafa Tajzadeh could be more popular, it is arguable that they could have attracted more than 18 million votes to defeat Raisi. Nonetheless, it is a fact that when the October 2021 Iranpoll survey asked: «If Larijani had been in the race, do you think Raisi would have probably won or not?», 82% replied yes, and only 12% replied no.<sup>40</sup>

The third remark is that the Reformist and Pragmatist factions had lost their grip on Iranian society, as shown by their defeat in the 2020 legislative polls. The disqualification of most of their candidates both in 2020 and 2021 left them without a clear alternative to voting for. The only option that some reformists and pragmatists had discussed before the final list was released was Larijani, who could never be considered a candidate with a reformist ideology or agenda. Consequently, the reformist/pragmatist vote drastically dropped from the times of Mohammad Khatami – the only self-proclaimed «reformist». In 1997, 20.1 million voted for him, and 21.6 did it in 2001. Despite the defeat in 2005, the three reformist candidates – Mostafa Moin, Mehdi Karrubi, Mohsen Mehralizadeh – obtained 10.5 million votes in the first round, 16.2 if we count those going to Hashemi Rafsanjani. In 2009, the two reformist candidates – Mir Hussein Mousavi and Karrubi – obtained 13.9 million votes. While not a reformist, Rouhani attracted as many as 18.6 million votes in 2013 and 23.6 in 2017. In these recent elections, Hemmati only got 2.4 million votes.

This trend indeed represents a severe backlash against reformist and pragmatist options to retain a certain quota of power within the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. With the passing away of Hashemi Rafsanjani in 2017, the political ban of former President Khatami politically, Mousavi and Karrubi still under house arrest, and Rouhani and his allies losing their credit in front of the Iranian society, all Iranian institutions are now controlled by conservative factions.

40. 'Iranian public opinion as Raisi takes the stage'.

Fourth remark, from the historical data on presidential elections, two facts can be underscored. On the one hand, that the last three presidents – Hassan Rouhani in 2017, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, and Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and 2001 – received more votes than Ibrahim Raisi, even though the registered voters were much fewer (36.2 million in 1997 vs. 59.3 million in 2021). On the other hand, the average percentage of votes obtained by the winner compared with the eligible voters in the previous elections was 48.9%. Also, in that period, the lowest turnouts ever, witnessed at the time of Ahmadinejad's victory in 2005 and Rouhani's in 2013, were still 36.8% in both cases. On his part, Raisi, in this last election, attracted only 30.38% of eligible voters, the lowest ever.

#### 3.4. *The impact of Raisi's victory on the political system*

The previous data analysis depicts a picture in which the elected president may enjoy a relatively low popular support, conditioning his performance as president, even more so if Raisi, as many have pointed out, aspires to be the next Leader of the Islamic Republic. In addition, the control that now the conservative camp exerts on the overall political system, including elective and non-elective institutions, does not mean that factional competition –previously between conservative, pragmatists, and reformists – will disappear. On the contrary, the power struggle will now be transferred to the intra-conservative competition to control elective and non-elective institutions of the political system. However, this struggle might not rely heavily on electoral competition since the participation rates may not recover after two consecutive elections with historically low turnouts. The Iranian political system has never been monolithic despite the repeated claims to the contrary in the international press and among the regime's critics inside and abroad. Instead, it has always been a factionalized system since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Many references can be made about the *hojjatieh* and *maktabi* factions<sup>41</sup> in the 1980s when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was still alive. The same happened after his demise in 1989, with the coexistence of different political factions: pragmatists, traditional conservatives, reformists and radical conservatives. Those factions have always been involved in a struggle for power, and that has affected not only the domestic policies but also the foreign policymaking and outputs.

41. These terms refer to factions that existed within the only party remaining after the 1979 revolutions, the Islamic Republican Party (IRP). They differed in the support to certain policies, such as the Islamization of society and state control over the economy or the foreign policy. The IRP was dissolved by Khomeini in 1987, but factionalism remained as the most salient feature of Iran's political system. For more details, see: Ariabarzan Mohammadi, 'The path dependent nature of factionalism in post-Khomeini Iran', *Discussion Paper, Durham University, HH Sheikh Nasser Al-Sabah Programme*, Durham, 2014; Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, Syracuse (NY): Syracuse University Press, 2002.

The Iranian political system is also very dynamic, and politicians and groups have been moving within the limits of the Islamic Revolutionary ideology from conservatism towards reformism over the past four decades. This happened with Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mir Hussein Mousavi, Mehdi Karrubi, Hassan Rouhani, Ali Larijani, Ali Motahhari, and others that were considered radicals in the 1980s and 1990s, but eventually became reformists, pragmatists or moderate conservatives. The fact that Larijani, who was the director of IRIB (the Iranian Broadcast corporation) and is the representative of the Leader in several institutions, was the «reformist and pragmatist» hope to defeat Raisi in these past elections speaks about how the Iranian politicians have been moving across the factional lines, looking to attract more popular support. This factional characteristic of the Iranian political system converted some of the politicians quoted above into the candidates desired by the West and neighbouring states, because seen as «moderates», compared with others still considered radicals, like Raisi, Saeed Jalili or Baqer Ghalibaf. However, we need to remember that in 2005 both Rafsanjani and Larijani were presidential candidates, and both were considered the «government candidates» that Iranians decided to turn their backs to, and indeed were not the candidates desired by some Western countries, differently from reformists such as Baqer Moin or Mehdi Karrubi.

As above noted, after Raisi's recent victory, the reformist and pragmatist camps' chances to recover in the short to medium term a share of power in the elective arena seems to be unlikely. However – and this also has already been noted – this does not mean that the political system is now unified, monolithic and that no discrepancies will appear. During this last electoral process, it was already possible to see some incidents heralding that the factional disputes between reformists, pragmatists and conservatives will now be transferred to the inner conservative circles.

The first of such incidents was the abovementioned leaked list of candidates by the IRGC affiliated Fars News Agency and the speedy congratulation by the IRGC Commander, Major General Hossein Salimi, once Raisi's victory was announced. It is necessary to mention that the IRGC are forbidden to publicly express political affiliations and preferences.

The second incident took place when the candidates' list was released: the President,<sup>42</sup> the head of the Expediency Council, Sadegh Larijani,<sup>43</sup> and even the Leader<sup>44</sup> himself showed their disconformity regarding the disqualification of, at least, Ali Larijani. However, and despite expectations of a possible retraction from the Guardian Council after Khamenei's re-

42. Maryam Sinaiee, 'Rouhani Asks Khamenei To Intervene To Legitimize Iran Presidential Election', *Iran International*, 26 May 2021.

43. Sadegh Amoli Larijani, Twitter posts, 25 May 2021, 15:22, <https://twitter.com/AmoliLarijaniir/status/1397166112874409984>.

44. Ali Khamenei, Twitter posts, 4 June 2021, 12:39, [https://twitter.com/khamenei\\_ir/status/1400748975959986177](https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1400748975959986177).

marks, the Council replied promptly, dismissing the possibility of any further change in the decision taken.<sup>45</sup>

A third incident is related to the results of the presidential election. They showed that, despite Raisi obtaining 18 million votes, two more than in 2017, he did not manage to get more votes than any of the three previous presidents, or to attract many more than those who already voted for him in the previous election. This means that, despite the formal support from other conservative groups, they did not or could not mobilize their social bases to massively vote in favour of a single conservative candidate.

#### 4. *Foreign Policy*

During the year reviewed in this article, the Iranian foreign policy included a «lame duck» phase in which an already internally discredited Hassan Rouhani tried to reinvigorate the JCPOA as a final legacy of his mandate. It also included the initial semester of Ebrahim Raisi, who started his tenure in a very cautious way, trying to continue with the nuclear negotiations and mend ties with the regional neighbours, without generating new confrontations with the broad international community.

##### 4.1. *The Ebrahim Raisi's New Foreign Policy*

It is worth remembering that the revolutionary Iranian foreign policy principles were coined by the founder and first Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1979 and sustained by his successor, the current Leader Ali Khamenei, since 1989. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there are no different trends and opinions on foreign policy issues within the Iranian political establishment. Indeed, the last three presidents showed different foreign policy orientations, with very distinctive outcomes, diplomatic strategies, and actions. The Iranian foreign policy complex is formed by decision-making units<sup>46</sup> composed of a combination of different personalities and institutions, formally or informally part of the political structure. They include: the Leadership, the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Supreme National Security Council, the Majlis (Parliament) Committee on Security and Foreign Policy, the IRGC, the National Army (Artesh) and the Expediency Council.

Iran's foreign policy decision-making units perform depending on who occupies the top positions and how much relative power they have within the political establishment to influence the collective decision mech-

45. 'Guardian Council: False reports on candidates have not been effective in the council' (in Farsi), *BBC News Farsi*, 4 June 2021.

46. Margaret G. Hermann, 'How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2001, pp. 47-81.



anism. The Leader has indeed the last word in every decision, but these decision-making units set the foreign policy orientations, make the decisions and implement the policies. Because of this, it is possible to understand why, despite Khamenei's alleged support for the candidacy of Ebrahim Raisi, who has been very critical of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Raisi's government engaged in direct negotiations in Vienna, following the line set by the outgoing administration. If there were no approval from the Leader, the negotiations would have never taken place nor continued. Conversely, without the Rouhani's administration's insistence on renegotiating the deal with the new Biden administration, the Vienna meeting would not have occurred.

Although it is too early to determine if there is or will be a «Raisi Foreign Policy Doctrine», some elements can help understand how his administration will perform.

In his first press conference on 21 June,<sup>47</sup> Raisi set the ideological framework of his foreign policy, with no concessions to the US on the renegotiation of the JCPOA or the Iranian missile program. Also, Raisi highlighted his interest in growing ties with China and Russia and the priority given to the neighbouring countries – the Arab Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. Despite the defiant tone of his speech, Raisi showed a predisposition for dialogue, contrary to the first public presentations of Ahmadinejad back in 2005, with whom Raisi has often been compared. Raisi is building his image internally, regionally and internationally, while at the same time building his power support structure within the establishment. Even though the presidency is relatively powerful, moreover with solid support coming from the Leadership and non-political actors such as the IRGC, Raisi needs to count on the support of the Majlis, the Guardian Council, and the Expediency Council to get his legislative proposals approved and to avoid backlash in his foreign policy initiatives. So far, the first two – the Majlis and the Guardian Council – seem to be aligned with him, but the Expediency Council, under Sadegh Larijani's leadership, may represent a counterbalance in some particular cases.

Moreover, in his bid for Leadership succession, Raisi must demonstrate he is ideologically fit for the position and a good administrator, politician, and public speaker. While the first one, namely ideological conformity, seems to have been achieved, the remaining three roles were not performed noticeably until now. In addition, being sanctioned by the US may limit Raisi's travels and presence, for instance, at the UN General Assembly meetings, which adds an extra handicap to his diplomatic agenda.

The most cited reference made by Raisi during his first press conference was his negative answer to a possible meeting with US President Joe

47. 'Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi: First news conference,' *Al Jazeera News*, 21 June 2021.

Biden. This seemed to predict a conflictive approach towards the nuclear negotiations and the US, but this may not be the proper interpretation, nor was it the case of the previous Iranian presidencies, at least until the end of 2021. Actually, no Iranian president has ever met an American president since 1979. Not even Rouhani met with Barack Obama during the nuclear negotiations that led to the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. Conscious of the controversy that such a meeting could have provoked, the diplomats of both administrations agreed only to have a personal phone conversation between the two presidents in November 2013, when Rouhani was attending the UN General Assembly in New York. The negotiations of the agreement and the pictures, including the Iranian and US flags, were always taken with US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif. Therefore, and as it also happened during President Ahmadinejad's mandates (2005-2013), and in other cases before him, every time that it was required, unofficial and official conversations between the US and Iran have taken place at different levels. This does not mean that Raisi would cancel the negotiations with the US, as the Vienna meetings throughout the year demonstrated.

Raisi also expressed his priorities in his foreign policy during his inaugural speech to the Iranian Assembly on 5 August.<sup>48</sup> He highlighted the continuity of the «look to East» policy focusing on the neighbouring and Asian countries, specifically China and Russia. Regarding the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Raisi emphasized the need to continue the negotiations with Saudi Arabia, initiated by the previous administration. However, this has been a usual initiative for every new president who assumed office, demonstrating how important it is – to all the Iranian political elites, regardless of their ideological orientation – to avoid escalating tension in the region, mainly with Saudi Arabia. Raisi stressed this idea in his first press conference, hinting also to a possible re-opening of its embassy in Riyadh. However, we had to wait until February 2022 to witness the first Raisi visit to a GCC state – Qatar.

The first visit Raisi made as president was to the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, on 16 September. Iran has had only observer status since 2005, but its priority since then has been to become a full member. Amir-Abdollahian, Iran's foreign minister, travelled to the Baghdad Summit on 28 August, being his first travel abroad. At that summit, the Heads of State and Government or Foreign Ministers from Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and French President Emmanuel Macron participated. These two events can shed light on how Raisi's priorities are materialized.<sup>49</sup>

48. Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Twitter posts, 5 August 2021, 17:36, [https://twitter.com/Iran\\_GOV/status/1423291846474694669](https://twitter.com/Iran_GOV/status/1423291846474694669).

49. Garrett Nada, 'Raisi's First Moves on Foreign Policy', *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 3 October 2021.

Contrary to what was expected, Raisi did not make any radical decision regarding any particular issue within 2021. Neither did he make any controversial declaration, which could possibly attract negative attention from the international community. On the opposite, Raisi seemed to prefer a low profile in foreign policy without strident declarations, while continuing with some previous commitments, such as the inherited nuclear negotiations.

#### 4.2. *Iranian Nuclear Diplomacy: From Rouhani to Raisi*

2021, the year reviewed in this article, marked the evolution of the nuclear negotiations to revive the JCPOA after US President Joe Biden assumed office in January 2021.

Raisi's approach to the nuclear deal or the US had no negative impact on resuming the rounds of negotiations. It included employing in them some figures active under the previous administration, such as Saeed Khatibzadeh, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson.

On 1 January 2021, Iran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that it would resume enriching 20% uranium-235 at the underground Fordow plant to comply with the legislation passed by the Iranian parliament. Enrichment activities began on 4 January under agency inspectors' monitoring,<sup>50</sup> and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif explained that measures were «fully reversible upon FULL compliance by ALL».<sup>51</sup>

The European and US authorities expressed their concerns about Iran's enrichment activities. The US Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control imposed a new round of sanctions on Iran's steel industry. Moreover, then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo issued a statement falsely asserting that Iran's new legislation required «expulsion of [IAEA] nuclear inspectors unless all sanctions are lifted». Pompeo urged that «Iran's expulsion of international inspectors must be met by universal condemnation». Iran responded that it did not plan to expel IAEA inspectors dispatched for regular inspections under Iran's comprehensive safeguards agreement.<sup>52</sup>

The IAEA released a series of reports in January detailing Iran's plans to conduct research and develop activities into uranium metal production, the installation of a cascade, or chain, of 174 IR-2m centrifuges at the Natanz enrichment facility, and possibly an additional two identical cascades, as well

50. 'IAEA head set to report to members on Iran enrichment', *Reuters*, 4 January 2021.

51. Javad Zarif, Tweeter posts, 4 January 2021, 18:04, <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1346110272482799616>.

52. U.S. Department of State, *Iran Threatening to Expel UN Investigators*, *Press Statement*, Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State 9 January 2021; U.S. Department of Treasury, *Treasury Sanctions Key Actors in Iran's Steel Sector*, *Press Release*, 5 January 2021.

as one IR-4 cascade and one IR-6 cascade.<sup>53</sup> The following month, on 10 February 2021, the IAEA verified that Iran had started producing uranium metal and that it had succeeded in producing a small amount of metal derived from natural uranium.<sup>54</sup> This action represented a violation of the JCPOA, which bans Iran from producing or acquiring uranium metal for fifteen years.

During a visit to Tehran on 21 February, IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi discussed with Iranian Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri and Ali Akbar Salehi (head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran) the suspension of the IAEA's additional protocol to the safeguards agreement and reached an arrangement whereby the IAEA would continue the verification of activities for three months. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeted on 23 February that Iran had suspended implementation of the additional protocol and that «Understandings [with IAEA Director-General Rafael Gross] show our good faith. All remedial measures reversible».<sup>55</sup>

On 4 March, Britain, France, and Germany decided not to pursue a resolution censuring Iran for halting implementation of the additional protocol and failing to comply with an investigation into past undeclared nuclear activities at the IAEA's Board of Governors meeting.<sup>56</sup>

On 2 April, the Joint Commission of the JCPOA met for its first consultative session in Vienna. They established two working groups: one tasked to outline which Iran's sanctions the US must lift to re-enter the deal, and the other with setting the nuclear limits Iran must revert to meet its own obligations under the agreement.

After a long negotiation with the AIEA, on 24 May, Iran agreed to a one-month extension of the February 2021 temporary bilateral monitoring agreement, which allows the IAEA to continue monitoring Iran's nuclear activities, in place of the additional protocol.<sup>57</sup>

On 21 June, the biannual report assessing the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorses the JCPOA, was released. It was accompanied by solid support from the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to the Vienna talks and appeals to the United States and Iran to return to compliance with the JCPOA.<sup>58</sup>

53. Francois Murphy, 'Iran works on uranium metal for reactor fuel in new breach of nuclear deal', *Reuters*, 13 January 2021.

54. Laurence Norman, 'Iran Has Started Producing Uranium Metal, in Violation of 2015 Accords, IAEA Says,' *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 February 2021.

55. Javad Zarif, 'Tweeter posts, 23 February 2021, 13:54, <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1364166855288623106>; IAEA, *Joint statement by the Vice-President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Head of the AEOI and the Director General of the IAEA*, 21 February 2021.

56. Julia Masterson, 'E3 Put JCPOA at Risk, Luckily Cooler Heads in Vienna Prevailed', *Arms Control Association*, 8 March 2021.

57. 'Iran agrees to extend IAEA nuclear monitoring deal for one month,' *BBC News*, 24 May 2021.

58. See UN Document at <https://www.undocs.org/S/2021/582>.

On 8 September, the IAEA released its quarterly monitoring report on Iran's nuclear activities, including details on Iran's growing enriched uranium stockpile, its development of advanced centrifuges, and its production of uranium metal. The IAEA's report also highlights the Agency's ongoing efforts to recover data from four cameras installed in an Iranian centrifuge assembly facility, after Tehran had suspended implementing the additional protocol in February 2021. Iran removed the cameras in June after an attack on the facility allegedly damaged the machines. The IAEA also released a report on Iran's NPT Safeguards Agreement, which outlined that Iran remained uncooperative with the Agency's investigation into possible undeclared nuclear materials from its pre-2003 activities.<sup>59</sup>

On 12 September, Iran and the IAEA reached a special agreement to allow Agency inspectors to access the remote monitoring equipment, service the units, and install new data storages.<sup>60</sup>

On 31 October, following up his pre-electoral campaign proposals, US President Joe Biden reaffirmed US willingness to return to the JCPOA so long as Iran did it. Biden also assured that Washington would only abandon efforts to restore compliance with the JCPOA if Tehran reneged on the deal. This happened two days after Biden had imposed new sanctions on IRGC members and two companies involved in the supply of drones to insurgent groups.<sup>61</sup>

On 29 November, the seventh round of talks to restore the JCPOA began in Vienna, five months after the sixth round concluded. Three days later, the Iranian chief negotiator, Ali Bagheri-Kani, reported that his delegation had submitted two drafts to the other parties on sanctions and nuclear issues.<sup>62</sup> This round concluded on 17 December, after the two parties agreed to a joint text that would serve as the basis for future discussions on the nuclear file.

On 27 December, the eighth round of talks began in Vienna. Enrique Mora, the EU official chairing the talks, warned that «we don't have much time». Nonetheless, he also said, «we have come a long, long way since the beginning of the negotiation... [and] from the point of view of the coordinator we are exactly at the point where we should be if we want to get the final successful result».<sup>63</sup>

59. Kelsey Davenport & Julia Masterson, 'IAEA Report on Iran Raises Serious Concerns About Monitoring', *Arms Control Association*, 8 September 2021.

60. IAEA, *Joint Statement by the Vice-President and the Head of Atomic Energy Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency*, 12 September 2021.

61. Kelly Hooper, 'Blinken on Iran nuclear deal: «We still believe diplomacy is the best path forward»', *Politico*, 31 October 2021.

62. Abas Aslani, Tweeter posts, 2 December 11:41, <https://twitter.com/AbasAslani/status/1466326586953809925>

63. Stephanie Liechtenstein, Tweeter posts, 27 December 2021, 22:08, <https://twitter.com/StLiechtenstein/status/1475544055450943489>.

By the end of the year 2021, on 30 December, the negotiations in Vienna paused for the New Year's holiday, and even though some progress had been made along the several round of negotiations, not breakthrough agreement had been reached until then.

## 5. *Conclusion*

The year under review, 2021, was indeed a year of transition in Iran. A transition from the pragmatist administration of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) to the conservative one of Ebrahim Raisi (2021-). For more than 20 years, the reformist and pragmatist factions, led by Mohammad Khatami, Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Hassan Rouhani, were able to influence the policy-making process, both the domestic and foreign ones. With achievements and failures, the last ones due to internal and external constraints, these factions keep a quota of power within the Iranian system, with a relatively high popular support. The election of Raisi represented, at least for several years, the end of that «reformist-pragmatist» era. A new one, controlled by a diversity of conservative factions, seems to be in place for the coming decade.

It is still early to assess the implications that Raisi's victory on the Iranian domestic and foreign policies. However, it is possible to conclude that the initial measures of the current administration were far from being radical measures and such to attract domestic backlash and international rejection. While it is still unclear which will be the socio-political agenda for the coming years, the year under review witnessed continuity with some of the most relevant policies implemented by the previous administration, particularly in relation to the continuation of the negotiations to restore the almost defunct JCPOA.