

Continuity of aggressive Iranian policies assured with Raisi's election: Former senior CIA official

Wed, 2021-06-23 22:40

LONDON: When Ebrahim Raisi was declared winner of Iran's June 18 presidential election, the world quickly turned its attention to the effect this will have on the Arab region, where the Islamic Republic's proxy militias and advanced weaponry have long inspired terror and yielded influence over internal affairs.

Raisi has a reputation as an ultraconservative, but Norman Roule, a Middle East expert and former senior official in the CIA, believes that the 60-year-old cleric's rise to power will change little in terms of the scope and direction of Iranian foreign policy.

"(The) election of Ebrahim Raisi means that Iran is transitioning to a new generation of leadership, which will be hard line and which will continue Iran's aggressive policies for the region," he told Arab News in a special interview.

Roule should know: He spent 34 years with the CIA covering the Middle East and is a senior adviser to the Counter Extremism Project and to United Against Nuclear Iran. He predicts the Iranian regime will continue to support its proxies throughout the Arab world as a means to project power abroad.

"Iran's proxies in the region – the Houthis (in Yemen), Kataib Hezbollah and other Iraqi militias, militias in Syria, and the Lebanese Hezbollah – will receive continued strong support from Tehran," he said.

On Monday, in his first comments since his landslide victory, Raisi rejected the possibility of any negotiations, as part of renewed talks on the nuclear deal, about Tehran's ballistic-missile program or its support for regional militias. "It's non-negotiable," he said.

Raisi secured nearly 62 percent of the 28.9 million votes cast in the election, which had the lowest turnout in the history of the Islamic Republic. The candidate list had been carefully manipulated by the regime's powerful Guardian Council to guarantee an acceptable winner.

Even with a strong mandate, however, in reality Iran's new president has very little control over Tehran's foreign and military policies, as the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its extraterritorial Quds Force is under the strict command of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

So when former Islamic jurist Raisi takes the reins from his more moderate predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, he will simply be "more ideologically consistent and supportive of these efforts," Roule said.

The new president's true power will lie in ensuring the hard-line ideology of Wilayat Al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic jurist) that was created by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini – father of the 1979 Islamic Revolution – will live on.

“Now that he is in the position of president, it gives him an opportunity to place hard-line actors, former IRGC personnel in particular, in different parts of the Iranian government, so that when the supreme leader passes on, he will be able to assure a smoother transition to a continued hard-line government, which because of his relatively young age could last another 20 to 30 years,” Roule said.

Dubbed the “Butcher of Tehran” by rights activists, Raisi is unrepentant about his bloody past. A protege of Khamenei, he is accused of ordering the execution of tens of thousands of dissidents over the past three decades. Iranian activists also claim that Raisi, as a junior prosecutor in the 1980s, headed “death committees” that buried murdered political prisoners in mass graves in 1988.

His election to the presidency could be an indication of further planned crackdowns on dissent and protest.

“At some point, the Iranian people may decide they've just had enough and I think that will be a moment of blood,” Roule said. “The security forces in Iran will push down on that.

“But you just can't help feeling sympathy for the Iranian people, who have to endure such a system at a time of such extraordinary and positive change so close to their border.”

Across the Gulf, countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are marching ahead in the fields of technology, entertainment and efforts to tackle the effects of climate change.

“I've spent many years following the region and I'm watching right now the most extraordinary and impressive series of political, social, economic and technological changes; Iran is not part of any of these changes,” Roule said.

“The Iranian people enjoy an extraordinary history but they are daily falling further and further behind. Iran is stuck in a time warp. It is stuck in an archaic political system, which is out of sync with where the world is going.”

Although Raisi has said there are no obstacles to Tehran and Riyadh mending their relationship, Roule views the president-elect's comments with disdain.

“The obstacles to better relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are in the form of Iranian missiles and drones, which are fired upon innocent men, women and children in Saudi Arabia every day it seems,” he said, referring to attacks launched from Yemen.

“Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states are conducting no aggression against Iran but Iran routinely provides proxies with the money, weapons and training

to attack innocent civilians throughout the region. That's a terrific obstacle."

Raisi is due to take up his office on Aug. 8 during what is a sensitive time, diplomatically. The US and European powers are trying to revive some version of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal, from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2018, arguing it was not robust enough.

While many believe a new and improved deal could defang Iran and help bring calm to the region, Roule firmly disagrees, predicting that any sanctions relief for Tehran in exchange for nuclear restraint will only fuel its other activities.

"There is no reason Iranian hardliners should oppose a nuclear deal," he said. "A nuclear deal does not constrain regional activities or missile activities. It provides them with steady resources to, indeed, support these activities.

"I don't believe that Iran is going to lessen its regional threat. I do believe that the nature of the regional political dynamic is changing as the conflict in Syria ends and as Iraq stabilizes. The Iranians are going to look to change their proxies, from fighting militias to political elements, and I think we're going to see a different type of Iran activity in the region."

To help achieve this, Roule predicts Iran will increase its support for its Lebanese proxy.

"Hezbollah needs to walk a very careful path in the coming months in Lebanon," he said. "They wish to retain control, their influence, the influence of their political allies over key ministries, but they want to make sure that they are not seen as bearing any responsibility for the economic and political decision-making and the hardships this has imposed on the innocent Lebanese people.

"Imagine that you have \$600-700 million a year being sent to a terrorist organization and militia which holds the Lebanese people hostage. This will increase after a nuclear deal, unfortunately, and the international community has very few options to constrain this."

Roule also believes the election of Raisi as president will make the possibility of a diplomatic solution to the war in Yemen even more remote, as the Iran-backed Houthi militia is unlikely to accept a package that diminishes its influence.

"I remain generally pessimistic only because the regional actors and the United Nations have worked very hard for years to bring the Houthis to the diplomatic table," he said.

"They have offered a series of political and financial packages to the Yemeni people, working through the Yemeni government, which is an actor we should never forget, and the Houthis have rejected this."

Twitter: @Tarek_AliAhmad



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Special interview](#)

[Norman Roule](#)

[Iran](#)

[CIA](#)

What does Ebrahim Raisi's election victory mean for Iran and the world?

[Israel army chief says cooperation with US against Iran 'unprecedented'](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1624476838990737800

Wed, 2021-06-23 22:36

JERUSALEM: Israel's army chief on Wednesday hailed "unprecedented" cooperation with the US, as he wrapped up a US visit focused on preventing Tehran from obtaining military nuclear capabilities. Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi's remarks came the same day as Iran said it had foiled a sabotage attack on an atomic energy agency building, as talks continue in Vienna between Tehran and world powers aimed at reviving their 2015 nuclear

deal.

Israel staunchly opposes the deal, which it fears could enable its arch-nemesis to obtain nuclear weapons.

Kohavi's visit, which began on Sunday, also came four weeks since Israel and Gaza's Palestinian Islamist rulers Hamas agreed a cease-fire ending 11 days of heavy fighting.

At the US military's Central Command in Florida, Kohavi met Centcom commander General Frank McKenzie, where he discussed the Gaza war, the Syrian arena and coordination between the countries.

"The IDF's operational cooperation with the US military is unprecedented in its scope and has reached new heights," Kohavi said in a statement, using the acronym for Israel defense forces.

"The mutual and main goal of action for the two armies is thwarting Iranian aggression," he added.

"Iran seeks to establish and entrench terrorists in many countries (and) continues to pose a regional threat in terms of nuclear proliferation, advanced weapons systems including ballistic missile capabilities, and the financing of terrorist armies," the Israeli general said.

Kohavi was also meeting with US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on "Iran's regional entrenchment throughout the Middle East and the flaws" of the nuclear deal with Iran, a statement from the military said.

In meetings with Sullivan and CIA head William Burns, Kohavi was "presenting multiple ways to prevent Iran from acquiring military nuclear capabilities," the army said.

Kohavi was due to return to Israel on Friday.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi](#)

[Israel](#)

[US](#)

[General Frank McKenzie](#)

Israeli foreign minister to make first visit to UAE
Pro-Palestine activists from Palestine Action arrested after protest at Israeli defense factory in UK

More blackouts ahead as Lebanon generators starved of fuel

Author:

AFP

ID:

1624463530388672900

Wed, 2021-06-23 18:59

BEIRUT: The owners of private generators that provide a vital backup to Lebanon's decrepit power grid warned Wednesday of their own cuts due to lack of fuel as the country's economic crisis deepens.

The national network run by Electricité du Liban is prone to blackouts and in some areas only manages to provide power for two hours a day.

That forces many Lebanese to pay a separate bill for a backup from neighborhood generators run by private firms.

With the Lebanese economy facing its worst crisis in a generation and the currency in freefall, private suppliers have warned they are struggling to secure enough fuel to keep running.

The crisis is so acute that on Wednesday the lights went out in a building belonging to the foreign ministry, forcing employees to stop work, Lebanese media reported.

"Generator owners in several regions started telling customers on Wednesday that they would not be able to provide electricity for lack of mazout," a widely used petrol derivative, said Abdu Saadeh, head of a syndicate for generator owners.

"We had warned late last week that the stocks would start running dry... and so far we haven't found a solution."

Lebanon has been roiled since autumn 2019 by an economic crisis the World Bank says is likely to rank among the world's worst financial crises since the mid-19th century.

The collapse has sparked outrage at Lebanon's political class, seen as woefully corrupt and unable to tackle the country's many difficulties.

Officials have blamed the current fuel shortages on stockpiling by traders and a surge of fuel smuggling into Syria.

Several people have been arrested on suspicion of smuggling in recent weeks, according to the police.

The central bank has set up a mechanism to subsidise fuels by up to 85 percent, but fuel importers have accused it of failing to implement the program.

The head of public Internet provider Ogero has warned that electricity cuts could also threaten Lebanon's access to the web.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Electricité du Liban](#)

[Lebanon](#)

[Fuel shortage](#)
[generators](#)

Mother and four daughters killed as they looked for fuel amid Lebanon's petrol shortage
Protests erupt after Lebanon bids to curb fuel smuggling

[Egypt stresses need for negotiated settlement on Renaissance Dam](#)

Wed, 2021-06-23 18:07

CAIRO: Egypt is keen to complete negotiations on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) issue, a government minister said, as Sudan on Wednesday asked the UN Security Council to meet and discuss the dam dispute.

Ethiopia is pinning its hopes of economic development and power generation on the GERD, but Egypt fears it will threaten its water supply from the Nile. Sudan is concerned about the dam's safety and its own water flow.

Mohamed Abdel-Ati, who is Egypt's minister of water resources and irrigation, emphasized his country's persistence in preserving its water rights and achieving the benefit for all parties in any GERD agreement that was reached.

On his visit to South Sudan, where he met the First Vice President Riek Machar and Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation Manawa Peter, he stressed the pursuit of a just and binding legal agreement that met the aspirations of all countries in development.

He also highlighted Egypt's flexibility in negotiations during the past few years which, he added, had been met with the "intransigence of the Ethiopian side."

Abdel-Ati arrived in Juba on Monday along with an official delegation for a five-day visit to hold talks on promoting bilateral cooperation, including in the field of water management.

They discussed the latest developments on the Nile water issue and their countries' current positions on the GERD.

Abdel-Ati said Egypt was implementing projects in all Nile Basin countries and African countries, and that the projects implemented in South Sudan aimed to serve its people and achieve stability for them by solving drinking water problems and protecting against the dangers of floods.

He added that projects were currently being implemented in seven countries and that the number was expected to increase to 10 soon.

His remarks came as Sudan asked the UN Security Council to meet and discuss the dam dispute.

Foreign Minister Mariam Sadiq Al-Mahdi called on the council to hold a session as soon as possible to discuss the GERD and "its impact on the safety and security of millions of people," Reuters reported, quoting a government statement.

She called on the council's leader to urge Ethiopia to stop the "unilateral" filling of the dam "which exacerbates the dispute and poses a threat to regional and international peace and security."

The Arab League's envoy to the UN, Maged Abdel Fattah, said on Tuesday that Sudan and Egypt were working on a draft resolution to the council on the GERD if Ethiopia did not reach a deal.

Arab states would lobby for the draft resolution to be approved, he told Egyptian TV, adding that he did not expect world powers to block it.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Egypt](#)

[Mohamed Abdel-Ati](#)

[Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam \(GERD\)](#)

Battle for the Nile: How Egypt will be impacted by Ethiopia's filling of GERD reservoir
Egypt steps up response to second filling of GERD

[World powers in new push for Libya peace](#)

Author:

Hui Min NEO and Shaun TANDON | AFP

ID:

1624447715747296600

Wed, 2021-06-23 10:49

BERLIN: Germany and the United Nations are bringing together representatives of Libya with powers that have interests in the country at a conference

Wednesday which aims for progress toward securing elections in the North African nation and the removal of foreign fighters.

The meeting at the foreign ministry in Berlin, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken among participants, follows up on a January 2020 conference where leaders agreed to respect an arms embargo and to push the country's warring parties to reach a full cease-fire. Germany has tried to act as an intermediary.

Countries that have been involved in the process include the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, along with Italy, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

Ahead of the conference, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas noted that much has been achieved in the past two years. An October cease-fire agreement that included a demand that all foreign fighters and mercenaries leave Libya within 90 days led to a deal on elections, due to be held on Dec. 24, and a transitional government that took office in February.

But "many challenges still lie ahead of us," said Maas. "For the further stabilization of the country, it is crucial that elections take place as planned and that foreign fighters and mercenaries really do leave Libya." He added that Wednesday's conference launches a new phase "in which we no longer only talk about Libya, but in which we are now speaking with Libyan men and women about the future of their country."

Blinken said that "we share the goal of a sovereign, stable, unified, secure Libya free from foreign interference – it's what the people of Libya deserve, it's critical to regional security as well."

"For that to happen, national elections need to go forward in December and that means urgent agreement is needed on constitutional and legal issues that would undergird those elections," he said at a news conference with Maas. "And the Oct. 23 cease-fire agreement has to be fully implemented, including by withdrawing all foreign forces from Libya."

The US special envoy for Libya, Richard Norland, said it was important to start bringing all armed groups in the country under a joint military command. "When foreign forces leave, they're going to need to be replaced by a viable united Libyan national military and police structure," he said. Meanwhile, aid group Doctors Without Borders said this week it was suspending its activities in two detention centers in Tripoli after "repeated incidents of violence toward refugees and migrants held there." It said staff had witnessed guards beating detainees at one center and received reports of people being shot at in another.

Libya has been a key transit country for migrants from Africa trying to reach Europe, especially after the collapse of order when a NATO-backed uprising toppled and later killed longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. The oil-rich country was long divided between a UN-supported government in the capital, Tripoli, and rival authorities based in the country's east, each backed by armed groups and foreign governments.

In April 2019, eastern-based commander Khalifa Haftar and his forces, backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, launched an offensive to try to capture Tripoli. Haftar's 14-month campaign collapsed after Turkey stepped up its military support of the UN-backed government with hundreds of troops and thousands of Syrian mercenaries.

Little progress has been made so far on getting foreign forces out of Libya. Jalel Harchaoui, a senior fellow at the Geneva-based Global Initiative

Against Transnational Organized Crime who follows Libya closely, said that it is the presence of foreign mercenaries, acting as a sort of deterrent, that has led to the current, if uneasy, peace.

“That’s what it comes down to, and of course it’s not politically correct to say,” he said. He cautioned that elections could deepen polarization if conducted too hastily.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Libya](#)

[Germany](#)

[US](#)