

## Iran: Afghanistan piles on pressure

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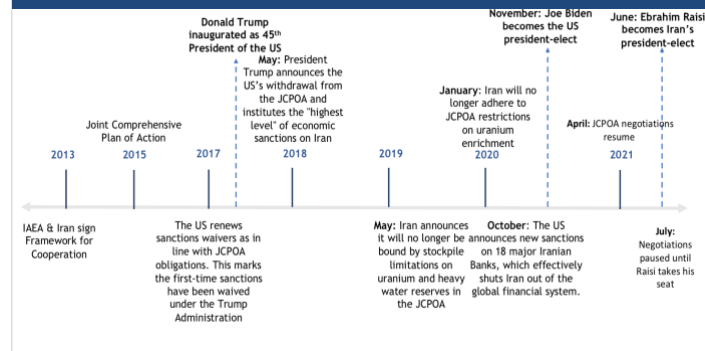
- Although Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) talks have been stalled for over a month, the momentum is expected to pick up following the inauguration of the new president, Ebrahim Raisi.
- Raisi and his cabinet are set to usher in a hardline political era for Iran, but the new president, a protégé of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, still intends to engage in negotiations with the US to reach a nuclear agreement.
- The new administration faces no shortage of challenges, both at home and abroad. Protests, power outages, the pandemic, economic volatility and the political crisis in Afghanistan are all set to test President Raisi.

### A hard line in the sand

Although an end to the longish hiatus of Iranian-US nuclear negotiations may be in sight, the coming days and weeks will certainly be no picnic.

- The contours of the Raisi administration are becoming clear; the new president's cabinet picks have been submitted to the Iranian Majlis (Parliament) and are now awaiting approval.
  - Raisi has a strong majority in Parliament, which means his picks are likely to be approved. Moreover, this means he will be able to push through legislation quickly, with a reduced chance of infighting and internal disagreements.
  - A potential star within the next administration is Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who is expected to replace Mohammad Javad Zarif as foreign minister.
    - Abdollahian is a familiar face within the regional and international diplomatic community. He served as head of the foreign ministry's special department for Iraq before taking his post as the Iranian ambassador to Bahrain from 2007 to 2010. He then took his seat as deputy foreign minister for Arab and African affairs before finally serving as a senior advisor to the Majlis.
    - He has called for foreign policies and relationships that focus on Iran's best interests. However, his main emphasis has been on strengthening Tehran's relationship with Eastern partners.
  - The other appointees include Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani as defence minister, Hojatoleslam Seyed Esmail Khatib as intelligence minister, and Ahmad Vahidi as interior minister.
  - Raisi's cabinet picks are truly hardline; they largely (and unsurprisingly) comprise Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) veterans as well as officials who served in public office during the administration of the former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (in office 2005-13).
- Raisi's predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, placed the nuclear deal at the core of his legacy. Raisi, however, has

Figure 1 - A summarised US-Iran nuclear diplomacy timeline<sup>1</sup>



reiterated that JCPOA negotiations will not be the focal point of his policy agenda, and that he will not return to the deal at any cost.

- Raisi has taken a much more transactional stance, following Supreme Leader Khamenei's lead as opposed to that of Rouhani.
  - Rouhani called engagement with the west 'a new chapter' in Iranian foreign policy and diplomacy.
- Nevertheless, Raisi supports Khamenei's policy to neutralise sanctions; after his inauguration ceremony, the new president called for sanctions to be lifted, stating that his government will 'support any diplomatic plan' that will realise this objective.
  - Raisi will, however, focus on a 'resistance economy' at home, fostering the growth of domestic industries rather than attracting western companies and investment.

### Besides US-related foreign policy challenges, neighbouring Afghanistan has just become potentially quite a lot more volatile.

- Regarding Afghanistan, Iran has so far played its cards close to the chest. Tehran had previously kept its options open, hosting a delegation of former government officials as well as Taliban representatives in July.
- With the undisputed Taliban takeover, Tehran is likely both to recognise and co-operate with the new Afghan government. However, it is likely that Iran will demand some safeguards for Afghanistan's Shia minority.
  - Following the fall of Kabul, the new Iranian president released a statement claiming that peace, calm and security in Afghanistan is very important to the Islamic Republic and that they are monitoring the news and developments in their neighbouring country very closely.
  - Afghans, who make up the largest migrant population in Iran, could multiply in number should large numbers of refugees flow into the country.
- The situation in Afghanistan certainly adds pressure on the US to expedite a deal.
  - Although a date to restart negotiations has yet to be set, talks are likely to begin in the coming weeks as the Biden administration reels from the backlash of the withdrawal from Afghanistan.
  - Although the US administration will not accept a deal it deems to be unfavourable, there is renewed pressure on the US to redouble efforts to prevent further instability in the region.
  - As we long predicted, reaching a deal was never going to be easy, nor was it going to be quick. In the current climate, the soonest point at which a deal is likely to be reached is the early Autumn.

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