

Death of Iranian president in yet to be explained helicopter crash further destabilizes a blazing Middle East

Keith Jones
20 May 2024

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian were among eight people killed in a Sunday afternoon helicopter crash in northwest Iran.

Their deaths are a further destabilizing element in a Middle East already set ablaze by Israel's imperialist-backed genocide against the Palestinians of Gaza and decades of US-instigated wars aimed at establishing Washington's unbridled hegemony over the energy-rich region.

Raisi, Iran's president since 2021, and Amir-Abdollahian were returning from a brief visit to Azerbaijan when their helicopter went down in a mountainous, heavily forested region some 55 kilometers from their destination, Tabriz.

Due to the inhospitable terrain, inclement weather and the helicopter's lack of a functioning emergency signal, rescuers only reached the crash site as dawn broke Monday.

Iranian state television has attributed the crash to an as of yet undetermined "technical failure."

The two other helicopters that returned from Azerbaijan along with that bearing the Iranian president did so without incident.

The Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri has named a high-level committee of military and aeronautic experts to carry out an on-site investigation of the crash.

Since the disappearance of Raisi's helicopter, Iranian authorities have sought to project a sense of stability and calm. They have referred to the crash as an "incident" but have not suggested that it was anything other than a terrible mishap.

The weather, as had been forecast, was blustery, with the mountains that the three-helicopter convoy were supposed to traverse covered in dense fog.

The downed helicopter was a US-manufactured, two-blade Bell 212, dating from before the 1979 revolution that overthrow the despotic US-backed regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi.

For decades, punishing US sanctions have prevented Iran access to Western-made aircraft, whether commercial or military, and to spare parts. In an interview with Iranian state television, former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said the US and its economic sanctions—which under George W. Bush, Obama, Trump and now Biden have expanded to

effectively deny Iran access to virtually all goods and technologies, including medical equipment and drugs—bear responsibility for the crash. "One of the culprits behind yesterday's tragedy," asserted Zarif, "is the United States, because of its sanctions that bar Iran from procuring essential aviation parts."

From the little that is currently known, it cannot be excluded that the crash that killed Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian was an act of sabotage, orchestrated by a dissident faction of the Islamic Republic's ruling elite or, as is more likely, Israeli intelligence or the CIA.

The Iranian investigation is at this point only hours old, as the first half-day was given over to a desperate search for the crash site and any survivors. Ultimately, the downed helicopter was located with the assistance of Turkish surveillance drones.

Even if Tehran did have evidence to suggest Sunday's crash was anything more than an accident, they would almost certainly want to scrutinize it at length and reflect on their response before making any public statement, given the explosive ramifications. Indeed, it cannot be excluded that their first impulse would be to cover up an assassination carried out through sabotage, so as not to lay bare a catastrophic security failure, that would undermine the regime and compel it to forcefully respond.

Both Israel and the US have carried out brazen and patently illegal assassinations of Iranian officials in recent years. These include the Mossad-organized killings of Iranian scientists inside Iran and the January 2020 US Predator drone strike on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Qasem Soleimani as he left Baghdad airport.

On April 1, Israel dramatically upped the ante in its shadow war with Iran when it killed three senior IRGC commanders in a strike on the Iranian embassy in Damascus. Iran responded 12 days later with its first-ever direct attack on Israel. However, its drone and missile strike was telegraphed well in advance on the calculation that a US-defended Israel would counter it and further escalation could be avoided.

The assassination of Iran's president would be tantamount to a declaration of war, but given the crisis of the far-right

Netanyahu regime and the Zionist state, it cannot be ruled out a priori.

What is certain is that there was considerable gloating in both Jerusalem and Washington over the deaths of Raisi and Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and that both powers will seek to exploit their fallout to advance their predatory objectives.

The US extended “official condolences” over the death of Iran’s president, but both White House National Security Spokesman John Kirby and US State Department spokesman Matt Miller made clear that they did so through gritted teeth. Miller, who speaks for a government that has armed and politically covered for Israel as it starves and slaughters the Palestinians of Gaza and that supports tyrannical regimes across the Middle East, including those of General al-Sisi in Egypt and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, denounced Raisi for killing “thousands.”

“We regret any loss of life,” said Miller. “That doesn’t change the record. ... He has blood on his hands.”

A *New York Times* article by the long-time CIA conduit David Sanger, purportedly on “the choice facing Iran’s next leaders,” indicated that Washington is at this point interested in continuing a secret dialogue it has been holding with the Iranian regime in Oman and in which the dead foreign minister’s deputy, Ali Bagheri Kani, acted as the principal speaker for the Iranian side.

Washington’s interest in this dialogue, which reportedly has involved multiple meetings over the past seven months as the US-backed Israeli war on Gaza has raged, has nothing to do with securing peace or even limiting tensions.

At the very outset of the Gaza war, Washington deployed two aircraft carrier groups to the region to threaten Iran. It has supported Israel in striking out at Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iranian-backed forces and IRGC personnel in Syria, while carrying out its own strikes on Iranian allies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Furthermore, Biden and Secretary of State Blinken, to say nothing of the Pentagon generals, have made clear that Washington is engaged in a multi-pronged drive to reassert US imperialist global dominance that includes the war in Russia, an all-sided economic and military-strategic offensive against China, and countering and effecting regime change in Tehran.

Through economic sanctions and constant military pressure from its allies, particularly Britain and Israel, Washington is seeking to degrade Iran’s military capabilities, destabilize and exploit fissures within the regime—and all with the aim of placing itself in the best position to wage war on Iran at a time of its own choosing.

Iran’s bourgeois clerical regime, meanwhile, finds its room for maneuver shrinking. It is being squeezed by the US and its imperialist allies, while having to contend with a restive working class, angered by mass joblessness, skyrocketing prices, political repression, acute social inequality and the targeting of the remnants of the social concessions made to

toiling people in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution.

Even before Sunday’s crash, the Islamic Republic confronted an impending leadership crisis. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has served as the Supreme Leader—wielding ultimate authority over key decisions and regulating the factional squabbles within the clerical bourgeois establishment—for more the three decades, is 85 years old and has long been in failing health.

In all his statements since Sunday, Khamenei has emphasized the stability of the regime and its institutions. As per the constitution, the vice president, Mohammed Mokhber, has been elevated to acting president. Mokhber is said to be close to Khamenei—for 14 years he headed the Supreme Leader’s foundation, Setad, whose vast holdings serve to underpin a huge patronage network—and to be part of the so-called conservative faction upon which he has come to increasingly rely. That faction, of which Raisi was a leading member, was more reticent in seeking rapprochement with the Western imperialist powers through the 2016 nuclear accord or JCPOA, now scuttled by the US, and favors more religious restrictions in daily life.

Amir-Abdollahian has been succeeded by his deputy Kani as foreign minister. This has been interpreted as a signal that Tehran wants to maintain a channel for dialogue with Washington.

Soon after Mokhber held his first cabinet meeting, he fielded a call from Russian President Vladimir Putin. In their respective readouts of the conversation, both Moscow and Tehran called for the continued strengthening of bilateral ties. To the consternation of the US and its NATO allies, Iran has responded to the scuttling of the JCPOA by expanding its economic and strategic ties with both Russia and China. This has included supplying Russia with cheap drones to fight the Ukraine war instigated by the US and NATO.

Under Iran’s constitution, if the president dies or becomes incapacitated, a new election must be held within 50 days. Late Monday, the IRNA news agency reported that the first round of a possible two-round Iranian presidential election will be held on Friday, June 28.

In the last election held in 2021 and won by Raisi, the Guardians Council arbitrarily barred most prospective candidates from running, including former two-time President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Turnout was under 50 percent for the first time ever, and a further 13 percent of ballots were deemed spoiled or invalid.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)