



Iran's late president Ebrahim Raisi (R) shakes hands with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in the Kremlin in December 2023.

cade of the 2000s, is a facilitator of Russia-Iran financial sector cooperation and has announced plans to open an office in Astrakhan, a Russian city just to the north of the Caspian Sea.

Russia's proactive response to the helicopter crash will be welcomed in Tehran. Russia dispatched planes to help find Raisi's crashed aircraft and Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu also offered assistance in the investigation into Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian's deaths. Putin's meeting with the Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali after the plane crash was a break in diplomatic protocol that highlighted the importance that Russia places on its relationship with Iran.

The manner of Raisi's death underlined the common problems the two countries face. Many have pointed to the parlous situation of civil aircraft in both countries as US and European sanctions make replacement parts hard to source. Russian officials have echoed Iran's former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's attribution of the crash to foreign sanctions. Russian Foreign Min-

ister Sergei Lavrov accused the US of undermining aviation safety by blocking Iran's imports of aviation parts.

While it's clear Russia-Iran relations benefit both parties, Russian concerns persist about what might follow Raisi's death. Military analyst Alexey Zhivov wrote in the ultranationalist outlet *Tsargrad* that: "Azerbaijan is a latent ally of Israel. If it turns out that Raisi [was killed], all this will end in a Transcaucasian war."

Former Russian ambassador to Saudi Arabia Andrei Baklanov warned that Raisi's death could threaten the recent de-escalation between Iran and Israel, although Iranian officials have not joined some Russian analysts in promoting conspiracies about US or Israeli involvement.

The future power balance inside Iran is of greater concern to the Kremlin. Amongst Russian experts and commentators, there is a division of opinion on Mokhber's viability as Raisi's successor.

Iran expert Mais Kurbanov contends that he is highly respected by the Iranian people and will win between 70-80% of the vote in the

June presidential elections. Vladimir Sazhin, a leading Iran expert at Moscow's Institute of Oriental Studies, is more circumspect, predicting an intense power struggle between "conservatives and radicals". Mokhber's lack of religious credentials could place him at odds with fellow hardliners.

While the Russia-Iran diplomatic partnership has strengthened along multiple tracks, the robust relationship between Putin and Ayatollah Khamenei has been integral to its success.

While the deaths of Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian are unlikely to alter the short-term trajectory of Russia-Iran cooperation, the Kremlin is keeping a watchful eye on the instability that might follow their deaths.

The swift completion of the trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which will lead to 50-75% tariff reductions, will be Russia's initial priority as it seeks to reinforce the image of a business-as-usual relationship.

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Martyr President