

# Past and Present: Threatened by a moderate Iranian president, Israel is pulling him into a fight

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**Israel prefers hardline leaders to maintain a monolithic view of the enemy. Its assassination in Tehran now forces the reformist Pezeshkian into a corner.**

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On July 5, Masoud Pezeshkian won the run-off elections in Iran to replace Ebrahim Raisi as president of the Islamic Republic, after the latter's death in a helicopter crash in May. During the short campaign, Pezeshkian sought to win over voters with the basic platform of his reformist camp: restarting negotiations with the West to lift sanctions, building the economy, fighting poverty, and investing in housing, healthcare, welfare, and civil society. He was officially sworn in as president at the end of the month.



*Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian. (Ayoub Ghaderi/CC BY 4.0 Deed)*

Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas' political bureau, came to Tehran to attend Pezeshkian's inauguration. Based on multiple reports, Israel hired local agents to plant explosives in the hospitality compound in which he was staying, used by the Revolutionary Guards to host high-ranking guests. Through [Haniyeh's assassination](#) in Iran's capital, Israel appears to have sought to drag the Islamic Republic into a regional war — one that Iran [hoped to avoid](#) — on the first day in office of the new, moderate president. The expectation is that Iran will have to respond, and more forcefully than its [previous choreographed attack](#) on Israel in April.

This continues a long and seemingly counterintuitive tradition of Israel preferring conservative, fervently anti-Israel presidents in Iran over reformists, whom it sees as detrimental to its strategic interests. After all, part of Israel's support among American and European governments derives from the idea that it is a Western democratic outpost in a "dangerous neighborhood," which can defeat bad actors in the Middle East before they reach Europe and the West.

According to this logic, Iran is the chief enemy: an anti-Western, antisemitic, theocratic dictatorship that poses a clear and immediate danger to the world. When Iran elects moderate leaders, it undermines this monolithic caricature — and Israel, which refuses to change its outlook toward its regional neighbors, sees a diplomatic threat.

*Palestinians take part in a protest following the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Iran, in the occupied West Bank city of Nablus, August 3, 2024. (Nasser Ishtayeh/Flash90)*

## **Decades of thwarted diplomacy**

In the mid-1990s, Iran was reeling after a turbulent 15 years: the revolution of 1979, an eight-year war with Iraq in which hundreds of thousands were killed and wounded, the death of Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989, and an economic crisis that threatened to crush the Iranian economy. Under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had assumed office in 1989, the country aimed to rebuild itself — and chart a new path forward internationally.

In particular, Rafsanjani sought to turn a new page in relations between Iran and the United States. As part of his policy of economic openness, and in order to revitalize Iran's oil industry and economy, he prepared a huge concession for the American oil company Conoco, which included the development of two new oil fields. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei approved the offer, recognizing the value of extending an olive branch to the United States, and by 1995, the U.S. State and Treasury departments had given Conoco approval to move forward with the deal.

Then the Israel lobby — [AIPAC](#) and the Israeli government — panicked and acted to thwart the franchise. After they warned members of the U.S. Congress of the “danger” of trade agreements with Iran, President Bill Clinton bowed to the pressure. In 1995, he issued two executive orders banning all trade by American companies with Iran, and then allowed a series of new sanctions to be imposed on Iran. The Conoco deal collapsed, and the opportunity to develop U.S.-Iranian diplomacy was lost.

The story repeated itself a few years later under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, who was elected on a platform that emphasized the need for dialogue between Iran and the West. Shortly after entering office, U.S. President George W. Bush signaled he was interested in [revisiting and potentially restoring](#) US-Iran relations. Therefore, Israel and AIPAC swiftly built up a broad coalition in Congress to renew sanctions on Iran.

After the attacks of September 11, the political and public discourse in the United States completely changed, but there were still avenues for U.S.-Iranian cooperation. Khatami, for his part, asked to help the United States stabilize Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion, which could have helped achieve a sustainable resolution to the war.

Iran had been the most important regional enemy of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and in December 2001, the United States, Iran, and Russia sat down together in Bonn to establish an Afghan Interim Authority to replace the Taliban — an agreement that led Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to accuse Bush of appeasement, à la Neville Chamberlain. The White House officially rejected those comments, but the next month the collaboration came to an end. On January 29, 2002, Khatami's efforts were answered by President George W. Bush's “Axis of Evil” speech and a series of new sanctions on Iran.

The United States, Israel, and the West had a much easier time with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Khatami's successor, whose provocative style and harsh anti-Zionist statements made it easier to portray Iran as a danger to Israel and the world. But moderate politician Hassan Rouhani was

elected president in 2013 on a promise to reach an agreement with the United States and the West that would allow Iran to maintain its nuclear program for scientific and civil purposes, in return for sanctions relief — a situation that Israel was once again unwilling to accept.



*Hassan Rouhani, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, speaks during a session at the Annual Meeting 2014 of the World Economic Forum at the congress centre in Davos, January 23, 2014. (World Economic Forum/CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)*

The [Iran nuclear deal](#) in 2015 represented a victory for diplomacy, but it was [presented](#) by Israel as a “charm offensive” meant to disguise Iran’s true ambitions. The Israeli government was determined to prevent a thaw in relations between Iran and the West and the possibility of another vision for the Middle East, which could limit Israel’s ability to maintain its policies toward Palestinians.

After Donald Trump was elected president, in his obscurantism and ignorance, he canceled the agreement, signaling to Iran that it has no partner in the United States, or even in Europe — where American sanctions prevented European economic cooperation with Iran. In turn, Iran accelerated its nuclear project in a way that would not have been possible under the agreement.

This helped contribute to the election of President Ebrahim Raisi in 2021, whose campaign emphasized the failed attempt at diplomacy with the West. However, even under Raisi, there were [contacts](#) between the United States and Iran, which had long-term diplomatic potential. Then came Pezeshkian’s inauguration — and the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran only a few hours later.

## **Urging escalation**

Unlike the picture that Israel and its allies paint, Iran is a rational actor. It is a country with domestic and international interests, and it employs many tools to achieve them: internal repression, ties with militias and non-state actors throughout the region, and various aid and support enterprises. When one strategy fails, Iran shifts to another.

Iran can survive and enjoy profitable cooperation with Russia and China. But its preferred way of rehabilitating its regional and international standing is through reestablishing relations with the West. Whenever it has had to choose between developing relations with Russia and China or an agreement with the United States and the West, [Iran chose the latter](#).

Haniyeh’s assassination in Tehran was intended to urge Iran to respond, and perhaps escalate hostilities, thus finally bringing about the [full-blown regional war](#) that Israel craves. Pezeshkian, on his first day in office, was forced to choose whether to abandon the platform he was elected on, and be dragged into a war that would mainly please his opponents within Iran (especially within the regime’s conservative establishment), or stick to his original path.

It is very possible that Pezeshkian will have to defend Iran’s reputation vis-à-vis the Palestinians, especially Hamas, and perhaps upgrade its support for the group. And so while Israel’s security services have proven that they can assassinate a Hamas leader in a hotel room in the heart of

Tehran, they have failed to protect millions of Israeli civilians.

Days after the assassination, multiple officials from Pezeshkian's administration affirmed that the current president's priorities [remain focused on domestic issues](#), especially Iran's economy. Iran's Foreign Minister even went on record to say that the Islamic Republic would [withhold its response](#) if Israel agreed to a ceasefire in Gaza — a message reiterated by Iran's UN delegation in recent days. The Iranian government thus remains reluctant to go to war, in part because it recognizes its domestic risks: war would likely strengthen the ultra-conservative opposition to Pezeshkian, and justify further escalation of oppressive measures at home and abroad.

But right now, Israel remains eager to pull Iran into a direct confrontation — with devastating consequences for civilians across the Middle East.

**Lior Sternfeld**

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• “Threatened by a moderate Iranian president, Israel is pulling him into a fight”. +972 Magazine. August 13, 2024:  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/180824/twenty-years-inside-story-frances-bloody-military-intervention-ivory-coast>

*A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).*

• Prof. Lior Sternfeld teaches modern Iranian history in the Department of History and the Jewish Studies Program at Penn State University. He is the author of “Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran.”

Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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