

'Technical Failure' Caused Helicopter Crash That Killed Iran's President, State News Agency Reports

The deaths of Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, and foreign minister left the country without two of its most influential figures at a moment of regional and domestic tumult. Funeral services will be held in three cities from Tuesday through Thursday, the state media said.

May 19, 2024

 Pinned



Farnaz Fassihi and Matthew Mpoke Bigg



Here are the latest developments.

The deaths of Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, and foreign minister leave the country without two influential leaders at a particularly tumultuous moment of international tension and domestic discontent, although analysts and regional officials expect little change in Iran's foreign or domestic policies.

Mr. Raisi, 63, and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian were killed on Sunday in a helicopter crash resulting from a "technical failure," Iranian state news media reported. They were traveling from Iran's border with Azerbaijan after inaugurating a dam project when their helicopter went down in a mountainous area near the city of Jolfa. Search and rescue teams scoured a rugged area of dense forest through rain and fog for hours before finding the crash site. There were no survivors.

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Analysts and officials in Iran are apprehensive about what comes next.

People gathering in Tehran on Monday to pray after the deaths of the country's president, foreign minister and other officials in a helicopter crash. Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times

The news that the Iranian president and foreign minister were killed in a helicopter crash brought shock and apprehension about what lies ahead as the country was flung, yet again, into crisis, according to interviews with analysts and politicians inside Iran and public comments by some officials on social media.

President Ebrahim Raisi was far from a widely popular or unifying leader, but in death his political opponents and rivals in Iran came together, offering condolences and messages of respect. Among them were the former presidents Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Khatami.

Mr. Khatami, who boycotted parliamentary elections in March to show discontent for the conservatives' unilateral rule, called Mr. Raisi a "respected and hardworking civil servant," apparently putting aside years of animosity and targeted attacks on him and his reformist party.

Iran announced on Monday that it would hold presidential elections on June 28. Analysts in Iran said that although the stability and survival of the Islamic Republic's rule was not at risk, many were apprehensive about who would be the next president and the makeup of the next government.

They said there were already discussions among analysts and politicians that the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, may encourage and allow for a more pragmatic and centrist president to form a new, less ideological government with the aim of defusing both domestic and international tensions.

"Naturally there will be political tensions and anxieties when a president is killed, and now we have no president in the country amid a long list of challenges," said Nasser Imani, a conservative political analyst in a telephone interview from Tehran. "Everyone is wondering who will take over and what policies will be prioritized, but the system desperately needs to inject some new blood into the government and signal new policies both at home and abroad."

Billboards honoring the deceased president, Ebrahim Raisi, quickly appeared in Tehran on Monday. Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times

Two of the three main branches of Iran's government — the presidency and the parliament — are now without leaders. Runoff parliamentary elections were held last week and a new parliament speaker has not been decided. The death of the foreign minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, also disrupts Iran's recent flurry of diplomacy with regional Arab countries to forge closer ties, manage the wider conflict with Israel and conduct indirect talks with the United States.

Sasan Karimi, an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Tehran, said in a telephone interview that Iran was facing three key issues politically: a new presidential election and cabinet; a new parliament starting soon with very little public support; and the question of who will succeed Mr. Khamenei, who is 85 and in fragile health.

Mr. Raisi was considered one of the front-runners to be Mr. Khamenei's successor, and he was also an elected member of the Assembly of Experts, the clerical body that chooses the supreme leader of Iran.

Hatef Salehi, who held a senior management position at Tehran's municipality but was fired recently because he criticized Mr. Raisi's policies, said in a telephone interview from Tehran that he was nonetheless "very anxious" about Iran's future and sad about the helicopter crash.

"I'm surprised to find myself so upset, but I think it's mostly because I'm anxious about what may happen in this period of transition," Mr. Salehi said. "Our sense of stability has been shaken even if we didn't like Raisi and his policies."

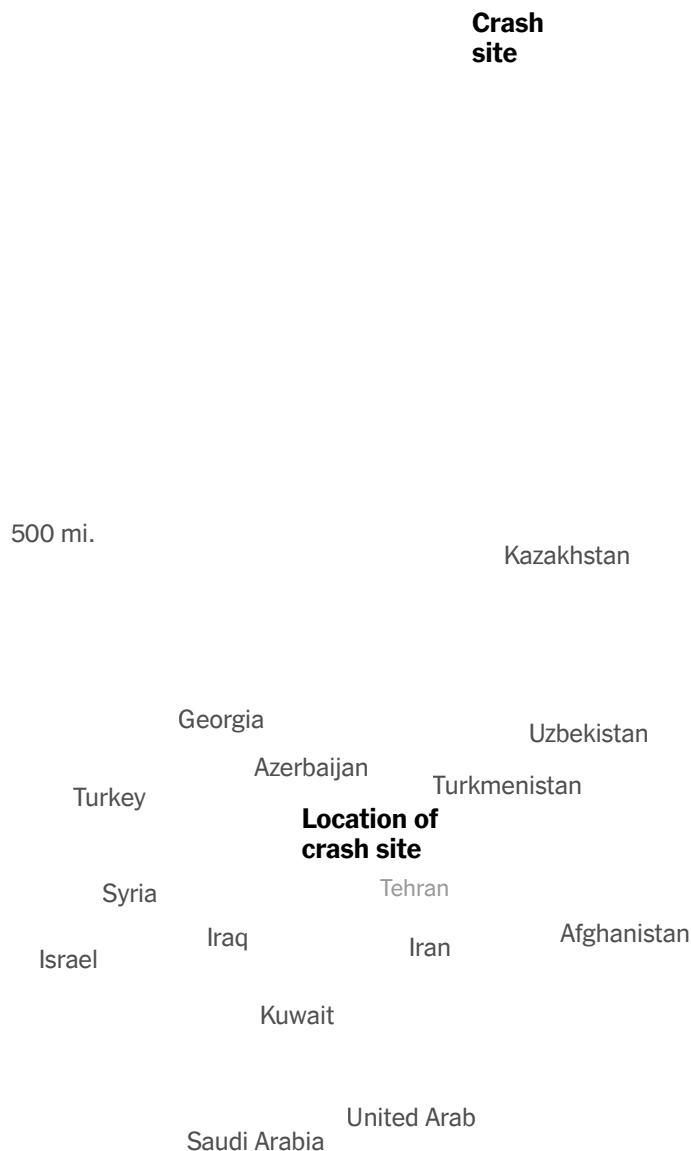
People gathering for prayers in Valiasr Square in Tehran on Monday after the deaths of the president and other officials. Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times

For the average Iranian, Mr. Raisi remained as polarizing in death as in life. His supporters holding public mourning rituals in Tehran, his hometown of Mashhad and other cities, while his critics, many of them victims of Mr. Raisi's brutal crackdowns and oppressive policies, celebrated.


Dr. Mohsen Asadi-Lari, a former senior official with the Ministry of Health, posted a message on Instagram that read: “Sometimes you have to wait for God to take revenge for you.”

He was referring to the failed attempts to seek justice through the judiciary for the deaths of his two children, Mohammad Hossein and Zeinab, who were killed when Iran’s Revolutionary Guards shot down a Ukrainian Airlines passenger plane with two missiles in January 2020, killing 176 people on board. Mr. Raisi was the head of the judiciary at the time.

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Sources: Satellite imagery from CNES/Airbus via Google Earth; basemap via Mapbox and OpenStreetMap
By The New York Times


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Michael Crowley




Following an official U.S. statement that said nothing specifically about Raisi's record, Matthew Miller, a State Department spokesman, was scathing at a daily press briefing:

"We have been quite clear that Ebrahim Raisi was a brutal participant in the repression of the Iranian people for nearly four decades," Miller said.

"Some of the worst human rights abuses occurred during his tenure as president — especially the human rights abuses against the women and girls of Iran," Miller added. "That said, we regret any loss of life, and don't want to see anyone die in a helicopter crash."

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Michael Crowley

Miller added that the Biden administration's "fundamental approach to Iran has not changed and will not change," and specifically noted that Americans would stand with Iranians pressing for "an open, free society and democratic participation."



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Michael Crowley



Matthew Miller, a State Department spokesman, dismissed a suggestion by a former Iranian foreign minister that American sanctions on Iran's aviation industry were responsible for the crash.

"Ultimately, it's the Iranian government that is responsible for the decision to fly a 45-year-old helicopter in what was described as poor weather conditions, not any other actor," Miller told reporters.

Iran's former foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, made the comments about American sanctions on Monday, according to the official Iranian news agency, IRNA.

  **May 20, 2024**
Leily Nikounazar and Vivian Yee



For some in Iran, the response wasn't sorrowful.

In Tehran on Sunday, Iranians checking their phones after news that a helicopter carrying Iran's president and foreign minister had crashed. Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times

When they learned that President Ebrahim Raisi's helicopter had crashed on Sunday evening, the many Iranians for whom Mr. Raisi was one of the faces of a corrupt, brutally repressive regime waited with bated breath — hoping his era of influence had finally come to an end.

Gallows humor was all over social media. One user posted an image of a bear on X, writing, “Don’t disappoint us,” egging on the bears of the mountain where the helicopter had gone down to finish the job.

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Eric Schmitt

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Eric Schmitt



Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III said on Monday that the Pentagon was awaiting the results of an Iranian investigation into the crash.

“Regarding the death of Iran’s president in the very unfortunate helicopter crash, we continue to monitor the situation,” Austin told reporters after a virtual meeting of Ukraine’s allies. “But we don’t have any insights into the cause of the accident at this point.”



Eric Schmitt

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Eric Schmitt

“I know the Iranians are investigating or will investigate, and so we’ll see what the outcome is, once their investigation is complete,” the defense secretary added.

Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA, via Shutterstock



May 20, 2024
Matthew Mpoke Bigg




Iran's president is not the first leader to die in a helicopter crash.

The scene of a helicopter crash in Brovary, Ukraine, in January 2023 that killed more than a dozen people, including the interior affairs minister, Denys Monastyrsky. Ed Ram/Getty Images

The president of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi, is but the latest leader to die in a helicopter crash. Mr. Raisi and Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, died on Sunday when the helicopter in which they were traveling went down in a mountainous area near the city of Jolfa in northwestern Iran.


Here is a brief look at some other prominent figures who have died in helicopter crashes:

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John F. Kirby, a national security spokesman at the White House, offered the government's "condolences" for the death of the Iranian president, but he said "we're going to continue to stand with the Iranian people as they fight for their own civil rights and, as they should, and we're going to continue to hold Iran accountable for all their destabilizing behavior in the region, which continues to this day."


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D.
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Kirby added that the Iranian president "was responsible for atrocious human rights in his own country" and had "a lot of blood on his hands." But, he said, "We certainly regret in general the loss of life and offered official condolences as appropriate."


 **May 20, 2024**
Farnaz Fassihi



The bodies of the president, foreign minister and other officials who perished in the helicopter crash will have funeral services in three cities over as many days, Iran's state media reported. There will be a public procession in Tabriz, the closest major city to the site of the crash, on Tuesday. The bodies then will be taken to Tehran, the capital, for a state funeral on Wednesday. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will deliver the Islamic prayer for dead at the service, and Iran is expecting heads of states from allies and regional countries to attend, state media said.

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Hossein Amir Abdollahian, the foreign minister, will be buried in Tehran. But Ebrahim Raisi, the president, will be taken to his hometown of Mashhad for another funeral service on Thursday. He will be buried in one of the holiest sites in Shiite Islam, the Imam Reza shrine.

 **May 20, 2024**
Erika Solomon
Solomon



Speculation over Iran's next supreme leader turns to Khamenei's son.

Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of Iran's supreme leader, for years has been considered to be a potential candidate to succeed his father, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Saeid Zareian/via Getty Images

He is known as a man in the shadows of Iranian politics. Yet Mojtaba Khamenei has a powerful influence over a country that rarely sees or hears him.

For years, the son of Iran's supreme leader has been speculated to be a potential candidate to succeed his father, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

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Ali Bagheri Kani, a deputy foreign minister and chief nuclear negotiator, has been named the next foreign minister of Iran. Bagheri Kani has led the Iranian delegation that has been secretly negotiating with the United States in the past year in Oman. He is a hard-line conservative, and it's unclear if he will remain foreign minister after elections are held in 50 days and a new government takes office.



May 20, 2024
Matthew Mpoke Bigg




Aging helicopters are a sign of the toll sanctions have taken on Iran, experts say.

Wreckage at the site of the helicopter crash near Jolfa, in northwestern Iran, on Monday. Azin Haghighi/MOJ News Agency, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

While Iranian state media said on Monday that the helicopter crash that killed President Ebrahim Raisi was the result of a “technical failure,” some Iran observers suggested that decades of international sanctions, which have caused the country’s aviation fleet to atrophy, might have played a role.


Iran has been under strict international sanctions since the 1979 Islamic Revolution — including U.S. measures that for decades prevented the Islamic Republic from buying new Western planes and spare parts.

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More details have emerged about who else was killed in the helicopter crash. The Iranian state news agency, IRNA, reported that in addition to Raisi and Amir Abdollahian, Malek Rahmati — the governor of East Azerbaijan province — and Mehdi Mousavi, the head of Raisi’s security team, also died. It reported that Mohammad Ali Al-e-Hashem, the local representative of the supreme leader, was also with them.

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A public funeral procession for Iran's president and foreign minister will be held in the northwestern city of Tabriz on Tuesday morning, Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi said. The bodies will then be taken to Tehran for an official funeral, he said.



May 20, 2024

Steven Erlanger Steven Erlanger covered the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution and has written about Iran's regional and nuclear policies for years.



NEWS ANALYSIS


Raisi's death disrupts the transition to a new supreme leader in Iran.

A banner with a picture of President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran on Monday in Tehran. He had been seen as a top candidate to be the country's next supreme leader. Majid Asgaripour/Wana News Agency, via Reuters

The sudden death of Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, opens a new chapter of instability just as the increasingly unpopular Islamic Republic is engaged in selecting its next supreme leader. Mr. Raisi, 63, had been considered a prime candidate, especially favored by the powerful Revolutionary Guards.


Even before the helicopter crash that killed Mr. Raisi, the regime had been consumed with internal political struggles as the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 85, the longest-serving head of state in the Middle East, is in declining health.

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Nader Nader Ibrahim
Ibrahim




Video by the Turkish broadcaster Ahaber appears to show mangled debris from the helicopter crash site in a foggy and densely forested area of northwestern Iran. Iranian state media reported that the Bell 212 helicopter went down in a mountainous area on Sunday.

 **May 20, 2024**
Anton Anton Troianovski
Troianovski



The Kremlin said President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia spoke by phone today with Mohammad Mokhber, Iran's acting president. The Russian leader had a close relationship with Mokhber's predecessor, with Iran a key source of weapons for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. The two had spoken by phone, by video link or in person at least 17 times in the last two years, according to the Kremlin's website.

 **May 20, 2024**
Patrick Patrick Kingsley Reporting from Jerusalem
Kingsley



Israel should expect little change from Raisi's replacement, experts say.

President Ebrahim Raisi at a news conference near the border between Iran and Azerbaijan on Sunday. EPA, via Shutterstock

After President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran was killed in a helicopter crash, Israeli officials quickly dismissed suggestions that they were behind his death, which Iranian state news media said was the result of “technical failure.”

Analysts said Monday that Israel, despite being one of Iran’s biggest foes, saw little strategic benefit from Mr. Raisi’s death and did not expect Iran to change its posture toward Israel as a result.

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Raisi's final trip put the spotlight on a key relationship in the Caucasus region.

President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran, right, meeting with President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan at the site of a dam on the Aras River between the two countries on Sunday. EPA, via Shutterstock

When he met his Iranian counterpart on Sunday, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan told him that the day would “go down as a beautiful and bright chapter in the history of Iran-Azerbaijan relations.”

It would be one of the last meetings President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran had before he died.


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The helicopter crashed due to a “technical failure,” the IRNA state news agency said in an English-language article paying tribute to Raisi. It appeared to be the first time the cause of the crash was indicated.

Wana News Agency, via Reuters

 **May 20, 2024**
Anushka Patil
Patil




Who was Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian?

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Iran's foreign minister, speaks during a U.N. Security Council meeting last month. Angela Weiss/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Hossein Amir Abdollahian was picked to be Iran's foreign minister in 2021 by the president, Ebrahim Raisi, during a volatile time for Iran's regional ties and for its relationship with the West.

Mr. Amir Abdollahian was a career diplomat and, like Mr. Raisi, a hard-liner. The two men died in a helicopter crash on Sunday in a mountainous region of northwestern Iran. Considered closely aligned with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Mr. Amir Abdollahian was also believed to have had a close relationship with Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, the powerful leader of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, whom the U.S. killed in a drone strike in 2020.

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Nikounazar



Pirhossein Kolivand, the head of the Iranian Red Crescent Society, shared details about the search-and-rescue operation in an interview with a state broadcaster. He said the vast search area, heavy fog and darkness slowed the operation, which involved about 2,000 people, all of them Iranian. "After hours of searching, at about 5 a.m., the wreckage of the helicopter was seen by the rescuers from a distance of two kilometers," Mr. Kolivand said. "It took 40 minutes to an hour to get there."



The
New
York

May 20, 2024
The New York Times



World leaders react to Raisi's death.

A black flag was placed outside the Iranian consulate in Hyderabad, Pakistan, on Monday, following the death of President Ebrahim Raisi. Nadeem Khawer/EPA, via Shutterstock

Many world leaders shared condolences for Iran on Monday after the deaths of President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian in a helicopter crash on Sunday.

Here is some of the reaction:

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Cassandra
Vinograd

May 20, 2024, 5:26 a.m. ET

Cassandra Vinograd



With the death of the foreign minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Iran's Cabinet has appointed one of his deputies, Ali Bagheri Kani, as the ministry's "caretaker," the IRNA state news agency reported. Kani has served as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator and was involved in the 2023 deal that freed imprisoned Americans in exchange for several jailed Iranians and Iranian funds.

Alex Halada/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



May 20, 2024, 5:03 a.m. ET

Alissa J. Rubin
Alissa J. Rubin



What to know about Mohammad Mokhber, Iran's acting president.

Mohammad Mokhber, who is acting president, had held senior positions in some of Iran's most powerful conglomerates. Iranian Vice President's Media Office

With the death of President Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's first vice president, Mohammad Mokhber, becomes acting president. Mr. Mokhber is a conservative political operative with a long history of involvement in large business conglomerates closely tied to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In a statement on Monday, Mr. Khamenei said that Mr. Mokhber must work with the heads of the legislature and judiciary to hold elections for a new president within 50 days.

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May 20, 2024, 4:40 a.m. ET

Leily Nikounazar
Nikounazar



Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued a statement offering his condolences and announcing five days of public mourning. He said that the first vice president, Mohammad Mokhber, will take over managing the government in accordance with Iran's Constitution. Mokhber must work with the heads of the legislature and judiciary to hold elections for a new president within 50 days, Khamenei said.



May 20, 2024, 4:22 a.m. ET

Farnaz Fassihi



Raisi's political rivals, some of whom had vocally criticized his rule, issued statements of condolence, including the grandson of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. "The Islamic Republic of Iran has faced many very difficult situations since its inception and has overcome them," said the grandson, Hassan Khomeini.



May 20, 2024, 3:24 a.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



The bodies of President Raisi and Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian, and those of the others on board the crashed helicopter, were being transferred by ambulance to the city of Tabriz on Monday morning, state television reported. The search and recovery operation has ended, according to the head of Iran's Red Crescent Society.

Iranian Red Crescent, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

May 20, 2024, 1:44 a.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi





Iran will want to project a sense of control and order in the aftermath of President Raisi's death, and to emphasize that early elections will happen in an orderly way. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said earlier in remarks about the crash that there would be "no disruption" to the work of the government. He also said that senior officials would remain in control of national security and border security.

Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times



May 20, 2024, 1:25 a.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



President Raisi's cabinet held an emergency meeting on Monday, leaving his seat at the center of the conference table empty as a symbolic commemoration, photos published by the state news agency IRNA showed. The cabinet issued a statement praising his service to the country and to the Iranian people, and vowing to follow in his footsteps. Mr. Raisi and his conservative government were not popular among the majority of Iranians because they had reinstated oppressive social rules, violently cracked down on dissent and marginalized rival political factions.



May 20, 2024, 1:09 a.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



President Raisi's death was announced from the podium of Iran's most revered Shia shrine, the mausoleum of Imam Reza, in his hometown of Mashhad. A large crowd of government supporters had gathered there overnight to hold a prayer vigil. People broke

into loud shrieks and wails when the announcement was made.



May 20, 2024, 12:52 a.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



IRNA, the government's state news agency, also announced the death of President Raisi, the foreign minister and everyone else on board the helicopter. It said he had been "martyred in the line of service."



May 20, 2024, 12:38 a.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



Tasnim News Agency, affiliated with Iran's Revolutionary Guards, published a statement saying that President Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian had been killed in the helicopter crash. It published a photo of Mr. Raisi with a headline that called him a martyr. Tasnim also said that the governor of East Azerbaijan Province, an Imam and two senior military officials who were in charge of Mr. Raisi's security had died in the crash, along with the pilot and the co-pilot.



May 20, 2024, 12:07 a.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



Iranians are waking up to news that rescue teams have reached the site where the president's helicopter crashed on Sunday. Officials and journalists at the site are telling the state news media that there is no sign of survivors. The government has not yet made an official statement announcing the death of the president, the foreign minister and others who were traveling on the helicopter.



May 19, 2024, 11:58 p.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



Initial photos and footage of the crash site posted on Iranian news sites showed debris and broken helicopter parts. In addition to the president and foreign minister, a cleric and the governor of the eastern province of Azerbaijan were among the officials on board the helicopter.

Iranian Red Crescent, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



May 19, 2024, 11:43 p.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



“Finding the location of the helicopter and seeing the scene there is no sign of any of the passengers being alive,” the head of Iran’s Red Crescent Society, Pirhossien Koulivand, who was at the site, told state television.



May 19, 2024, 4:50 p.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



The head of Iran’s Red Crescent Society, Pirhossein Kolivand, told state TV that search and rescue teams have not located the site of the helicopter crash after more than 10 hours of looking, and have made no contact with anyone on board. Any rumors to the contrary were false, he said. Kolivand said rescuers were using their best guesses to set the search area and had no confirmation of the exact location of the missing helicopter.

Ali Hamed Haghdoost/Wana News Agency via Reuters



May 19, 2024, 4:33 p.m. ET

David E. Sanger David E. Sanger has covered Iran's nuclear program, and its challenge to the West, for nearly 30 years.



Iran and the United States are struggling to find their way out of simultaneous crises.

A man held an image of Qassim Suleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force, who was killed by an American drone strike in 2020, during an anti-Israel rally in Tehran last month. Abedin Taherkenareh/EPA, via Shutterstock

Even before the announcement on Monday that President Ebrahim Raisi of Iran had died in a helicopter crash, relations between Tehran and the United States had come perilously close to open conflict. What unfolds in the next few days — including what Iran declares was the cause of the crash — could well determine whether the two countries are able to grope their way out of several simultaneous crises.

Over the long term, the struggle that matters most is the one that centers on Iran's nuclear program. The program had largely been contained after the Obama administration negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015. But President Donald J. Trump denounced and abandoned the deal six years ago, and eventually Iran resumed production of nuclear fuel — enriched to a level just short of what would be needed to produce several bombs.

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May 19, 2024, 3:55 p.m. ET
Farnaz Fassihi



Supporters of the government flocked to religious shrines for group prayers, and in Tehran's Vali Asr square about 50 people held a vigil with a speaker urging national unity. But the government's critics were far from sympathetic, with many on social media

highlighting the brutality of Raisi's leadership, including violent crackdowns on dissent during his time as judicial chief and president.

Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times

 **May 19, 2024, 3:31 p.m. ET**
Vivian Nereim
Nereim



Iran is confronting a volatile world, at home and abroad.