



## Iran's Foreign Policy Under Masoud Pezeshkian: Tendencies and Challenges

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

#### An Exceptional President

Masoud Pezeshkian came to power through early elections, at a moment when the Islamic Republic was facing unprecedented challenges.

#### Assad's Fall Was a Key Turning Point

The fall of the Assad regime in Syria, during Pezeshkian's first year as president, has major implications for the future of Iran's influence in the Middle East.

#### The War on Gaza Will Have Long-Lasting Impacts

Israel's war on Gaza imposed itself on Pezeshkian's foreign policy agenda, an effect that is likely to continue well beyond his first year in office.

#### Perennial Tensions with the United States

Iranian-American relations remain a major point of contention in Iranian politics, and continue to pose challenges to the country's foreign policy.

## KEYWORDS

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Cover Image: This handout picture provided by the Iranian presidential office shows Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian giving a speech during a rally marking the 46th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution at Azadi Square in Tehran on February 10, 2025. (Photo by Iranian Presidency / AFP)



## Introduction

Iranian foreign policy is an important topic that has been extensively studied, given the Islamic Republic's strategic location in the Middle East and the Asian continent. This issue brief draws its importance from a tense regional and international climate, which has bred growing uncertainty about the behavior of states and the orientations of governments. The need to track Iranian foreign policy also mounts with every political transformation following elections, particularly Iranian presidential elections.

This issue brief attempts to trace and forecast the foreign policy orientations of the Islamic Republic's ninth president, Masoud Pezeshkian, and the challenges he faces, especially on complex topics related to the Middle East, Iran's relations with the West, and its nuclear program—all in a context of political and security uncertainty that the region has not witnessed since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. This brief addresses developments since Pezeshkian's election victory and their repercussions for his foreign policy. It also presents an analysis of the discrepancy between the positions declared during his election campaign, and the policies imposed on him by regional and international developments since he assumed office.

“Pezeshkian became the first president in the history of the Islamic Republic on whose watch Iran would engage in a direct military confrontation with Israel.”

These developments have included the assassination of Hamas political bureau head Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran; that of Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary-General of Hezbollah, in Beirut; the rolling back of Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon with the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024; and finally, Donald Trump's arrival to a second presidential term in the United States.

## An Exceptional President at a Pivotal Moment

Masoud Pezeshkian came to the Iranian presidency through early presidential elections, following the death of his predecessor, Ebrahim Raisi, in a plane crash in May 2024. Pezeshkian became the first president in the history of the Islamic Republic on whose watch Iran would engage in a direct military confrontation with Israel; the two sides exchanged fire in two separate incidents, in April and October 2024. His presidency also coincides with a critical phase in the history of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East, marked by an unprecedented decline in its influence, first through the weakening of Hezbollah's role in Lebanon, and the complete decline of Iranian influence in Syria.

Pezeshkian diverged little from the paths of his predecessors during his election campaign. He avoided discussing foreign policy, and focused instead on domestic affairs, especially the economic issues that directly affect the lives of Iranian citizens. This was arguably expected, as any Iranian presidential candidate understands that the position is limited to heading the executive branch,<sup>1</sup> as foreign policy is formulated through dialogue between that branch, the office of the Supreme Leader, and the country's security and military institutions. The resulting policy is implemented only after the approval of the Supreme Leader, in his capacity as the regime's ultimate political and religious authority.<sup>2</sup>

However, this focus on economic issues in electoral discourse is closely linked to two fundamental issues in Iranian foreign policy. The first is that of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran over the past four decades, including international sanctions under UN Security Council resolutions, those imposed by regional organizations such as the EU and others, and unilateral sanctions imposed by countries such as the United States. Any talk of sanctions is therefore, by definition, linked to foreign policy.

The second issue is the deterioration of the Iranian economy, largely driven by the aforementioned economic sanctions. This has manifested in two contexts: firstly, Iranian foreign policy, especially in the Middle East; and secondly, the question of the Islamic Republic's nuclear program and the resulting, ongoing showdown with the United States and the EU. Therefore, while Iranian electoral candidates might appear to avoid discussing foreign policy, this overlooks the important, hidden side of election campaigns that speak to voters' priorities, primarily of improving the economic situation—which can only be resolved through foreign policy.

### When Politics Doesn't Go as Planned

Pezeshkian laid out his foreign policy agenda in two articles, both published shortly before he was sworn into office on July 30 last year. The first, in Arabic and aimed at the Arab public across the region, was entitled: "Together to Build a Strong and Prosperous Region,"<sup>3</sup> while the second, in English, addressed a global audience, under the title: "My Message to the New World."<sup>4</sup> In the former, Pezeshkian laid out his vision of Iran's relations with its neighbors, specifically Arab neighbors. He focused on political and cultural geography, and the need for regional cooperation and management of differences through continuous dialogue and policies aimed at nurturing development and progress in the region. He also highlighted Iran's position on Palestine, notably its support for resistance movements, and drew attention to the threat posed by Israel and its nuclear program, which is not subject to the same monitoring and attention as Iran's nuclear program. None of this is surprising. These points align with long-standing Iranian policies—as might be expected from a veteran political figure who has held senior positions, including as Minister of Health during the era of President Mohammad Khatami (between 1997 and 2005), and for several terms as a member of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Iran's parliament).

Pezeshkian's article in English, while emphasizing the same points, presented his vision of Iranian foreign policy from a more global angle. It focused on Iran's development of its strategic relations with China and Russia, especially since Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to pursue a comprehensive strategic agreement with Iran.<sup>5</sup> It also addressed Iran's burgeoning ties with Latin American countries. Regarding U.S.-Iranian relations, it focused on the failure of European countries and the United States to uphold the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA, the nuclear deal signed by Iran and the P5+1 group (i.e. the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) in the summer of 2015. It laid out the challenges to the agreement after the first Trump administration withdrew from it in May 2018, followed by Europe's failure to maintain its end of the bargain. This situation also prompted Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi to hint, in August, at the possibility of new negotiations given the change in regional and international circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

Pezeshkian's articles raise a fundamental question about the decision-making mechanism that produces Iranian foreign policy, and the extent of the president's influence. While many factors feed into the policy-formulation process, they are all underpinned by Chapter 10 of the Iranian Constitution, specifically Articles 153, 154, and 155.<sup>7</sup> These articles clearly reject foreign hegemony and proclaim Iran's independence in setting its foreign policy, as well as expressing the country's support for occupied and oppressed peoples who seek independence and reject foreign hegemony. These constitutional principles are integrated with a political culture built around the national, Iranian dimension and the religious-sectarian dimension, while the ideological and revolutionary aspects of the political system's orientations cannot be ignored.<sup>8</sup> Yet none of this necessarily negates the influence, to some extent, of the president's personality on Iranian foreign policy, as was demonstrated in two contradictory episodes. The first was the experience of former president

Khatami, whose personality helped calm tensions between Iran and the rest of the world, including its neighbors, between 1997 and 2005. By contrast, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, from 2005 to 2013, saw significant tensions not only with the international community, but also with other political forces within Iran.

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Foreign policy issues imposed themselves on Pezeshkian from the day he was sworn in as president, with the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh. That event marked a dramatic beginning to his presidency, whose first year has given clues as to the future directions of Iran's foreign policy, in theory until the end of his term in 2028.

Haniyeh's assassination in Tehran, followed by that of Nasrallah in Beirut, constituted a dramatic shift that pushed Tehran into an unexpected phase of confrontation, rather than the calm it desired. The killings followed a period in which Iran had been able to adapt quickly to accelerating political developments related to Israel's war on Gaza, to recover from the overwhelming sense of shock that had dominated the first days of the conflict, and to embark on diplomatic efforts to try to end it.

Tehran sought to address the war on Gaza in a way that balanced between preserving its own interests as a state and as a political system, while leaving space for its ideological principles of defending the oppressed and upholding the right to resistance. Foreign Minister Araghchi frankly stated that unlike Israel, Iran was not seeking to expand the conflict in the Middle East.<sup>i</sup> Yet the unfolding war and the intensity of Israel's aggression did not help Iran in

this regard. Not only was Haniyeh assassinated on Iranian territory, but in September 2024, Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Israel was to extend its war into southern Lebanon, with two goals: returning residents of Israel's northern settlements to their homes, and destroying Hezbollah's military and political capabilities.<sup>10</sup> Israel's war on Gaza and its expansion into Lebanon, in response to the “support fronts”<sup>i</sup> opened by Hamas allies, represented the beginning of a transformation in Iran's stance towards Israel. It now adopted a strategy of direct confrontation, seeing this as the only way to avoid an all-out war with Israel or a comprehensive conflict that would engulf the entire region. After Netanyahu declared the opening of a new front in southern Lebanon, the Iranian political and security establishment appeared to have concluded that Tehran would be the third target, after Gaza and southern Lebanon, in a war that Netanyahu was gradually expanding, with U.S. and Western support.

Israel's successes in targeting Hezbollah's top leadership—first Nasrallah, then his expected successor Hashem Safieddine, in addition to the top tier of the movement's military commanders—confirmed the accuracy of that assessment. This prompted Tehran to opt for a direct confrontation with Israel. Yet despite the escalation across the region, a ceasefire was concluded between Hezbollah and Israel on November 27. This was followed by a truce in Gaza on January 15, 2025. The two developments provided an opportunity to ratchet down tensions, albeit temporarily, in the showdown between Iran and Israel.

The shift in Iran's foreign policy strategy was not limited to attacking Israel directly, but extended to threats to change its nuclear doctrine, seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, like North Korea, Pakistan and India, to enhance its deterrent capacity against Israel, ensure its own security and stability, and become the 10<sup>th</sup> member of the club of nuclear-armed states.<sup>ii</sup>

i. The phrase “support fronts” (jabahāt al-musānada) refers to the actors that attacked Israel in response to its war on Gaza: Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Iran-allied groups in Iraq.

ii. The nine officially nuclear-armed states are the US, Britain, France, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea. Israel also reportedly has nuclear weapons, but it neither denies nor confirms this.

Discussions on the possibility of changing Iran's nuclear doctrine began in the first year of Pezeshkian's presidency, following the exchanges of direct fire between Iran and Israel, when General Ahmad Haqtaab, head of Iran's Nuclear Protection and Security Corps, announced that Tehran may review its nuclear policies in light of Israeli threats to its nuclear facilities.<sup>11</sup> This was followed by a letter sent by 39 members of the Iranian parliament to the country's National Security Council, demanding a review of the Islamic Republic's nuclear doctrine.<sup>12</sup> Iranian officials echoed with further comments about changing Iran's nuclear doctrine. Kamal Kharazi, Iran's former Foreign Minister and head of the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations, explicitly stated that "the option of changing the nuclear doctrine is still on the table."<sup>13</sup> If such a move were officially adopted by the pillars of Iran's political system, represented by the security, political, and religious establishments, President Pezeshkian would be unlikely to oppose it.

“The shift in Iran's foreign policy strategy was not limited to attacking Israel directly, but extended to threats to change its nuclear doctrine.”

The fall of the Assad regime in Syria was another watershed moment for Iran's influence in the region. The takeover of Damascus by the Syrian armed opposition, represented by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and led by Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly known as Al-Jolani) effectively brought an end to Iran's influence on two strategically vital axes, Damascus and Beirut, which had represented the center of gravity of Iran's regional clout since the early 1980s.

There is no doubt that the establishment of a new political system following the collapse of the Assad regime represents a fundamental setback to Iran's influence in both Syria and Lebanon, and a key historical development in the presidency of Masoud Pezeshkian. However, in this context, it is important to note that Iran's influence had been in

an accelerating state of decline since 2012, when Syria had become a security, political, and economic burden on the Iranian political system.

The decline of Tehran's influence in both Syria and Lebanon could usher in a return of Saudi Arabia as an influential player in both countries, after a years-long absence. This could create a new dynamic in which Saudi Arabia uses its regional and international clout to generate growing support for the new government in Syria and to push for the lifting of the economic sanctions that had been imposed on the Assad regime.

## The United States: Present and Absent

The direct, reciprocal military engagement with Israel referred to above was not the first or only challenge to face Pezeshkian as president, nor is it likely to be the last. He must also grapple with several pressing developments closely linked to that confrontation—first and foremost the fall of the Assad regime, which has precipitated the rapid decline of Iranian influence in both Syria and Lebanon, and secondly the return of Donald Trump as 47<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Trump's return to power sparks memories of his policy of maximum pressure on Iran during his first term in office, which aimed to squeeze Iran's financial resources by imposing crippling sanctions on its oil exports to weaken it economically and financially, thus preventing it from extending financial support to its allies across the Middle East.

To this end, the Trump administration exerted pressure across the board, leveraging every available tool—including diplomatic influence—to prevent countries including Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia, from purchasing Iranian oil. During Trump's first term, U.S. pressure succeeded in slashing Iranian oil exports from about 2.5 million barrels per day to just 350,000 bpd.<sup>14</sup> During that period, the process of selling Iranian oil became complicated in many aspects, including the question of the currency used (the dollar or the local currency of the buyer), the role of intermediaries in the sales

process, and the mechanism of sale, which involved a third party. All this led to a significant reduction in Iranian oil revenues, but Trump did not stop there. He also announced Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA.<sup>15</sup>

The decline of Iran's influence in Syria and Lebanon and Trump's return to the White House have left Iran in a state of apprehension. Tehran's political and security establishment do not expect the new Trump administration to be less hardline than the first, especially given that Washington views Iran's recent setbacks as a strategic defeat that calls for redoubled political and economic pressure on the Islamic republic. This unease is only reinforced by the make-up of Trump's foreign policy and national security team, with Marco Rubio taking over as Secretary of State, Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defense, Mike Waltz as National Security Advisor, Steve Witkoff as Special Envoy to the Middle East, and Elise Stefanik as U.S. Ambassador to the UN. What unites these figures, beyond being Republicans and their loyalty to President Trump, is their hardline stance towards the Islamic Republic and its policies in the Middle East, which they see as a direct threat to Israel, Washington's most important strategic ally in the region.

“With the return of Donald Trump, Iran seems likely to revert to its old strategy of opening up to the EU.”

In his aforementioned article in the Tehran Times, President Pezeshkian criticized the policies of Trump's first administration, which withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018, and that of Joe Biden, which refrained from rejoining the deal and strongly supported Israel in its war on Gaza. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi later confirmed that the nuclear agreement had been overtaken by events and was no longer viable, due to regional and international developments, meaning it could serve—at best—as a reference document for any future negotiations.<sup>16</sup>

These statements preceded the fall of the Syrian regime, Iran's main ally, a development that will cast its shadow over any future negotiations between Iran and the West over its nuclear program. With the return of Donald Trump, Iran seems likely to revert to its old strategy of opening up to the EU, taking advantage of the emerging differences between European nations and the new U.S. administration. Tehran is moving towards opening a negotiating track with certain governments in Europe (Germany, France and Britain) regarding its nuclear program, thus resuming a negotiating approach that it had begun in 2003.<sup>17</sup> This strategy aims to prevent the formation of a unified Western front against Iran.

In addition, the Pezeshkian government is seeking to make the most of its membership in the BRICS bloc,<sup>iii</sup> by pushing forward an agenda of political and economic cooperation among its members. This was clearly evident in President Pezeshkian's attendance at the grouping's 16<sup>th</sup> summit in the Russian city of Kazan.<sup>18</sup>

In a related context, and amid intensifying efforts to open negotiations over its nuclear program, Iran is seeking to block Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's attempts at escalation, by reaching out to the Trump administration and exploiting the U.S. president's political preference for ending wars and using American power to build peace. This could allow Tehran to block any Israeli attempt to strike its nuclear facilities. This explains Pezeshkian's comments that Iran must “deal with its enemies patiently,”<sup>19</sup> and that the door to negotiations with Washington remains open, providing it “fulfills its commitments.”<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note here that relations with the United States remain a major point of discussion and contention within the political system in Iran, where the traditional, conservative movement sees the United States as the “Great Satan.” This difference has had a negative impact on all attempts to reset relations between the two countries. However,

iii. The BRICS bloc, established in 2009, currently includes 10 member states: founders Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, along with Ethiopia, Egypt, the UAE, Iran, and Indonesia.

the impact of this division may wane in the face of the major strategic losses Iran has suffered of late, which could push it to show greater flexibility in its relations with the United States.

## Conclusion

The broad lines of Pezeshkian's foreign policy were laid out before he actually assumed office. They have since been affected by the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and its regional repercussions, the fallout from the war on Gaza and its spillover into Lebanon, the assassinations of leaders of Iran-allied movements, and the direct attack on Iran's sovereignty. All these developments imposed themselves on the trajectory of Iranian foreign policy in the first year of Pezeshkian's presidency, and their effects are likely to reverberate well beyond that.

“The option of negotiations with the United States cannot be ruled out, given Iran's decades-long strategy of buying time by showing a degree of temporary flexibility, in order to weather difficult phases or situations.”

Pezeshkian's presidency comes at an important moment in the history of the Islamic Republic, comparable only to the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. It is also clear that Tehran faces unprecedented foreign policy challenges. The fall of the Assad regime and the ongoing confrontation with Israel have rolled back the Islamic Republic's influence and forced it into a position of reactivity.

When it comes to developments over its nuclear program, Pezeshkian's government is proposing an initiative with two tracks. The first would open the door to negotiations with European countries such as France, Britain and Germany, in an attempt to alleviate the pressures that could accompany a return to Trump's maximum pressure policy. The second pillar of the initiative involves bringing online

an advanced generation of centrifuges. That step came after the meeting of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency in November 2024, which had demanded that Iran cooperate more closely with the agency, especially after steps Tehran had taken in response to Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA.<sup>21</sup>

As Israel expanded its war in the region following October 7, 2023, and Iran's political and security establishment concluded that this war posed an existential threat to itself and its allies, the unlikely scenario emerged that Tehran might move towards a policy of complete withdrawal from its regional role, even with the decline of its influence in Syria and Lebanon. Accordingly, the possibility of further military engagement with Israel remains high, albeit with Iran exercising a high degree of strategic caution in order to endure Donald Trump's second term in office with the lightest possible losses.

However, the option of negotiations with the United States cannot be ruled out, given Iran's decades-long strategy of buying time by showing a degree of temporary flexibility, in order to weather difficult phases or situations that pose a challenge to the regime's existence. Given the political and security uncertainty generated by rapid developments across the region, Pezeshkian's government may adopt a calmer approach with its neighbors, reflecting an attempt to adapt to rapid regional developments, especially those that have impacted Tehran's role in the Middle East. It will also seek to strengthen its relations with China and Russia, with implications for the level of tension with the West and the United States in particular, especially with regard to Iran's nuclear program. This trend was evident in the signing of the so-called Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Iran and Russia in January 2025, after a delay of about three years.<sup>22</sup> This agreement is the second of its kind, after Iran's strategic agreement signed with China in March 2021.<sup>23</sup>



In conclusion, with the first year of Pezeshkian's presidency, Iran began a new chapter in its foreign policy, one that might be entitled "the day after." It follows the decline of both the nuclear agreement and Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon. Given its declining role in the Middle East, Tehran will keep the option of developing its nuclear capabilities and raising levels of uranium enrichment on the table as a way of applying strategic pressure.

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