

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

SEP2018

Your window on Iran
from in side and abroad



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report highlights key developments in Iran in September 2018, in an effort to present an accurate account of the country for Arab readers who closely follow Iranian affairs. The report includes three parts: the first sheds light on Iran's domestic affairs; the second shows Iranian interactions in the Arab world; and, the third part focuses on Iranian interactions in the international arena and with its ties with major world powers.

On the domestic front, four issues come to light in this report: the first discusses the ideological efforts by universities and religious seminaries to promote ethical social, irrespective of the unethical actions of the Iranian revolution since its inception in 1979. Back then, the revolutionaries launched a wide-scale cultural revolution plan to purge universities and build social values consistent with their ideologies, conceptions and expansionist projects for the revolution. Nearly forty years on the plan has clearly failed, and the Iranian intelligence submits frequent reports to supreme bodies warning of western ideologies running through the fabric of Iranian society. This has cast doubts on whether the revolution has accomplished much by way of building a new culture, especially the doctrinal and ideological aspects of such a culture including the Islamization of humanities sciences in universities and schools.

The second issue involves an analysis of the recent letter written by dissident politician Mehdi Karroubi in which he criticizes the revolution. In the letter, sent during the drafting of this report, Karroubi blasts the supreme leader Ali Khamenei, his exclusionary policies and absolutism in running the affairs of the country. He reminded Khamenei of his meddling in the constitution to grant himself absolute powers. He also blamed the supreme leader for all the mistakes the regime had been committing at all levels. This letter was not the first of its kind. It is one of many messages Karroubi wrote and leaked to the media where he explains all the mistakes made by the regime in both theory and practice. He accuses Khamenei of being the number one reason for the revolution's deviation from achieving its ends to promote an authentic revolutionary ideology and development agenda.

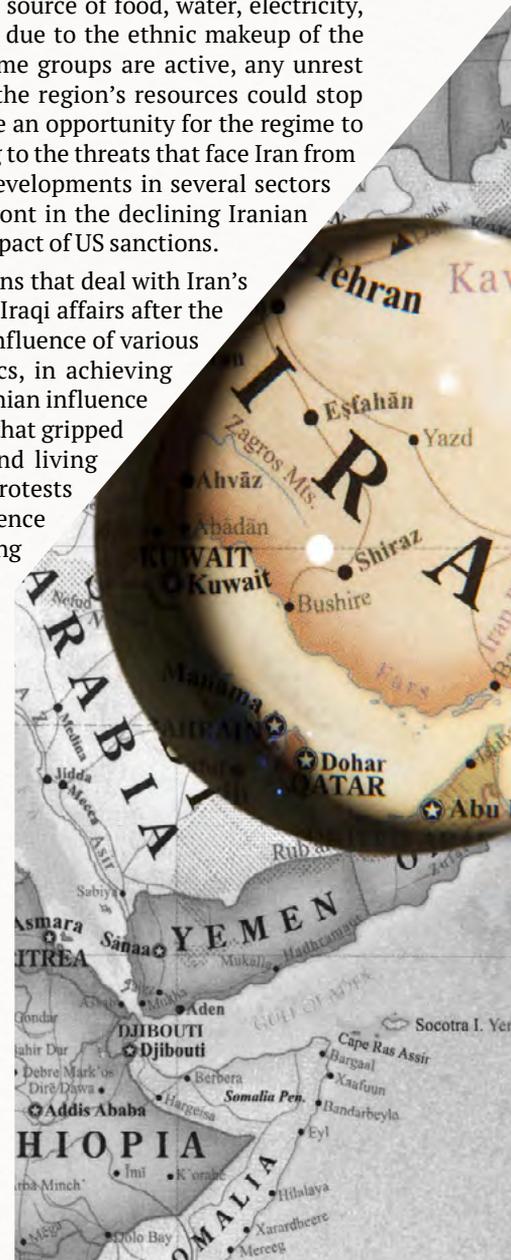
The third issue focuses on the security and defense aspects of Iran's recent developments, including the attack on the military parade in Ahwaz, the motives behind the attack, and the security services' poor handling of the attack. Reasons behind the failure of the security services in dealing with such attacks is explored mindful that previously, the Iranian parliament and Khomeini's tomb also came under attack by

terrorists earlier last year. The IRGC, then, did not launch the same kind of reprisal missile attacks carried out this time following shortly after the Ahvaz attacks, against hotbeds of ISIS in Syria. The latest IRGC attack was a message for those at home and abroad that the Iranian military and security establishments were still capable and powerful enough to launch counter-attacks on terrorist cells. The Iranian narrative related to the aerial attack on Syria's Bokamal city is explored in this section in more depth, citing a statement of the IRGC which lauds the defensive capabilities of Iran and its ability to hit targets precisely. This comes amid reports from Kermanshah province that the operation had failed and that two missiles exploded in the skies of the Iranian province and did not hit targets.

Finally, the economic importance of the Ahvaz region and its significance to the Iranian economy is explored in this section. The region is the main source of energy supplies and stockpiles for Iran. It is also the prime source of food, water, electricity, and other strategic and service commodities. Thus, due to the ethnic makeup of the region mainly populated by Arabs where anti-regime groups are active, any unrest that occurs there disturbs the regime which fears the region's resources could stop flowing to Tehran. The recent attacks in Tehran were an opportunity for the regime to achieve several ends at home and abroad, by pointing to the threats that face Iran from terrorists. This section will also review the latest developments in several sectors in Iran in September, including on the economic front in the declining Iranian exports, and government attempts to mitigate the impact of US sanctions.

This report is divided into three parts in the sections that deal with Iran's involvements in the Arab world. The first deals with Iraqi affairs after the recent legislative elections. The report reviews the influence of various political forces in Iraq, including the role of clerics, in achieving political cohesion in Iraq against the backdrop of Iranian influence and meddling. It also discusses the popular protests that gripped Basra due to the deterioration in the economic and living conditions of its residents, and the impact of these protests on the political scene and with regard to Iran's influence in the region. This part will argue the need for a strong Iraqi premiership with a personality that does not partake in running the state as it was before through rampant corruption and extreme Iranian meddling. Iraq's top religious authority went to pains explaining that the country needed a new face as its leader, and not politicians who took part in running the country dismally in the past.

The section also deals with the latest developments in the Syrian crisis. These developments include the agreement on Idlib and the forced displacement of fighters. It discusses the Sochi agreements and the understandings from it on how to de-escalate tensions in Idlib. It is argued that forced displacement schemes were planned by the Assad regime, as Russian and Iranian forces remained in areas around Idlib where the opposition forces once maintained a presence. According to the new ceasefire deal for Idlib, Syrian opposition forces should be moved to





Idlib province. The move was disastrous since all opposition forces of different affiliations were forced together into one group. The area accommodates nearly 1.1 million displaced persons as well as 2.6 million of the province's residents, adding confusion on the ground on how the deal can be retained.

Amid the incessant strikes by Russia and the Assad regime over Idlib in an effort to re-take the province from fighters, there is more massacre on a horrendous scale that is happening than that which took place when Aleppo was re-taken by government forces. There is now a possibility that renewed war will ensue in the area between Iran, Syria, and Russia on one side and the Turkish-backed opposition forces. These countries held talks recently in Tehran. When the meeting failed due to Russia's and Iran's rejecting to cease fire in Idlib, unlike Turkey which insisted there should be a ceasefire, a bilateral meeting was held in Sochi between Russia and Turkey. The meeting resulted in a deal to establish a demilitarized zone of an area ranging from 15 to 20 kilometers to separate Assad regime forces, which besiege the area, from the opposition.

Despite the signing of the agreement and the start of work to implement its provisions, there is speculation that the interim agreement will soon collapse. The report presents a number of future scenarios for the Idlib agreement in light of excluding both Bashar and Iran from the consultations leading up to signing it. The third part of this section deals with the Yemeni file. It focuses on Houthis' rejection of the US-brokered settlement. The group refused to travel to Geneva for peace talks. The Houthi rejection to participate in new talks was not straightforward. The group demanded a jet for the Houthi delegation to take off from Sana airport. When the Arab coalition agreed to this demand, more demands were brought forth by the group. The group demanded transporting their wounded aboard the jet. Then a dispute broke out over who could represent the group in the negotiations. This led to the failure of the UN to hold a new round of peace talks to end the Yemeni conflict.

The report focuses on two key issues to examine Iran's latest developments internationally. The first relates to the US-Iranian relations and the escalatory rhetoric in between Tehran and Washington in September 2018. This as the US president Donald Trump and his administration place pressure on Iran to renegotiate its nuclear agreement. A second issue

involves Iran's behavior in the Middle East region and its ballistic missile program, issues that the US administration says it will address when dealing with Iran. Iran refuses to engage in negotiations with the current US administration. It believes US pressures could lead Iran to be on the losing end when it comes to its involvements in the region and its missile defense program.

The report explores the trajectories of the relationship between the two countries to measure the strength of US sanctions on Iran as well as the cards that Iran will use to mitigate the impact of the US sanctions whether by depending on Europe, Russia and China or through creating other options to alleviate the impact of the US economic sanctions. The Iranian regime may also focus on the home front, to tackle the structural problems of the economy and settle the situation at home economically and politically.

The second issue examined in this section involves Iranian-British relations. The report explores details of this relationship, especially after the UK leaves the EU, which allows it to pursue a middle ground policy on Iran. There are mounting tensions still between Iran and the UK due to the arrest of British people of Iranian origins in Iran who face severe charges including espionage for foreign countries, and promotion of counterrevolutionary and anti-regime ideologies.



DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

Ideological File

Concerns on the secularization of
curricula's at the Hawza and the
sustainability of the Cultural Revolution

September 2018 witnessed several interactions at the level of the religious seminary [Hawza], foremost of which were remarks made by pro-regime clerics. In their remarks, they expressed concern about secularization, particularly of curricula's at Iranian universities. They are fearful of Western ideologies and their impact on the youth.

These remarks include the ones made by the cleric Makram Shirazi during his meeting with Mostafa Rostomi, the head of the institution representing the Supreme Leader at Iranian universities. In the meeting, which included Rostomi's aides, Shirazi called for locating the places where translated books promoting rival cultures were archived and nix them, especially books in the humanities.⁽¹⁾

Also, IRGC senior leaders, are concerned about the cultural and ethical landscape in Iran. They want radical changes to be enforced, starting at Iranian universities.⁽²⁾

The main reason behind the regime's attempts to Islamize curricula's is because it wants to remove its rivals on university campuses. The regime aims to crush those opposing Islamization in general. This aim led to thousands of academics being arrested, others chased and the closure of universities for nearly three years during the years after the 1979 revolution.



Through these measures, the revolution attempted to make its identity prevail through forcibly imposing it on society. Rifts between the traditional clerics and the liberals were utterly deep due to constitutive and philosophical differences. This was clear in the remarks by the former late President Hashemi Rafsanjani in the aftermath of his conversations with a reformist figure. "Cleric Mohammed Mujtahid Shabsteri came over and spoke to me for over an hour about our differences, about the Line of the Imam with liberalism, represented by Bani Sadr, Nahda Azadi and others, and I told him that the whole matter revolves around jurisprudential Islam. These people don't accept such jurisprudence. And we have no way but to implement this jurisprudence, with deeper efforts and a dynamic Ijtihad."⁽³⁾

This conversation between Rafsanjani, one of the tycoons of jurisprudential Islam,⁽⁴⁾ and one of the magnates of the reformists shows how the two parties are far apart on philosophical aspects. It also indicates that the regime, from the very onset, ruled out

the participation of opposition currents in state affairs. It deems such a role impossible. Thus, it resorted to imposing its own ideology and unilaterally running the affairs of the state. Therefore, Iranian secular figures such as Shirus, Shabsteri, and Malikan, focused on refuting the jurisprudential structure as an unholy and man-made accomplishment. Ahmed Iqbal, one of the followers of Hussein Montazeri, called for establishing a new jurisprudential system in place of the current one.⁽⁵⁾

Based on the foregoing, the regime saw that for it to implement its decrees, it should wrest control over cultural arenas absolutely. It has been working, according to Abdel-Karim Soroush, to develop a religious culture in society. The regime has the absolute freedom to set red lines in thoughts, ideologies, and actions. If it deems necessary, it will resort to violence to achieve its aim.⁽⁶⁾

It can be claimed that the Velayat-e Faqih theory involves a guardianship over cultural affairs. In case the guardianship of the jurist has clout over all worldly and religious affairs, it is natural to include culture as a key component in shaping the identity of the state. Furthermore, Velayat-e Faqih will not achieve stability unless it enforces cultural guardianship. It is the main pillar for the theory.

According to Abdel-Karim Soroush, the regimes taking over of cultural affairs and its Islamization of knowledge ends up glamorizing the use of violence and permitting the use of tools of repression. Thus, the regime should not take over shaping cultural affairs since this means sacrificing democracy for power. The mission of forcibly culturing the people, literally kills culture completely.⁽⁷⁾

Forward-looking vision: will the Islamization operations pay a dividend?

Will the Islamization of science and curricula at universities, and beyond, succeed? And if success is a possibility, why did not this succeed 40 years ago? These two questions are significantly important.

However, in the meantime, providing answers to them seems to be difficult and complicated. There are generations that were born after the revolution, did not participate in it and have ambitions contrary to that of the generation of the revolution. They did not witness the end of the Iraq-Iran war, and the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, but witnessed modernity, globalization, and sophisticated technology. All these developments led to the emergence of a generation that does not believe in the revolution nor the Velayat-e Faqih theory. Therefore, the gap between the two generations has grown deeper. A large segment of the youth and women want to keep up with the information and technology revolution. But there is ruling elite that still believes in revolutionary jurisprudence and the Velayat-e Faqih theory. The regime wants to mold the scientific arena and universities based on its vision.

It is difficult, considering these dynamic transformations, that the regime will succeed in its vision. Also, political and economic failure has led to social uprisings and widespread criticism from the post-revolutionary generation. This will render the regime's aim much more difficult to pursue, even if it is based on religious criteria. The natural position has been to resort to repression and the use of power to impose its own vision. This is a plain admission of failure of preserving the popular incubators, as called in Shiite Fiqh: 'Satisfaction of Believers.'

Political File

Karroubi strongly criticizes Khamenei and calls on the Assembly of Experts to question him



Mehdi Karroubi, who chaired the Iranian parliament for two terms (1989-1988 and 2000-2004), increased his anti-Supreme Leader rhetoric post-2009 presidential elections. This has caused controversy and has represented a real challenge to the Iranian regime. At that time, Karroubi accused Ali Khamenei of motivating the security forces, the IRGC, his office, and his son Mujtaba to interfere in the elections to favor Mahmud Ahmadinejad. This led Karroubi to resign from the Expediency Council and as Secretary General of the Association of Combatant Clerics, as well as, from being Khamenei's advisor.⁽⁸⁾

From his house arrest, Karroubi sent a letter to the Assembly of Experts, carrying a bold demand- for the first time by a former Iranian official- to question and interrogate Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei for the harsh conditions in the country. Also, he called on the Assembly of Experts to exercise its supervisory role over the Supreme Leader instead of praising and flattering him, as well as, to abide by Article 111 of the Constitution that calls for the Supreme Leader to be removed if he fails to implement articles 5 and 109 of the Constitution.⁽⁹⁾

Karroubi accused both Khamenei and the late former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani of changing the Iranian constitution after Khomeini's death in 1989 to allow the Supreme Leader to permanently rule. In his letter, Karroubi said, "Khamenei

has been chosen to be a temporary Supreme Leader despite not having the necessary requirements for this position, but he and his group, including the late Hashemi Rafsanjani have changed the Constitution.” He added, “After Khomeini’s death, the Constitution Amendment Committee has made some amendments to the constitution the way Khamenei, who was President of the Republic at that time, wanted and he has been appointed Iran’s new Supreme Leader.”

The additions to the Constitution were:

- » After Khamenei had succeeded Khomeini, a number of members of the Constitution Amendment Committee such as Azeri Qomi demanded to change the Constitution by adding the term “Supreme” to “Velayat-e Faqih” and increasing the powers of the Supreme Leader.
- » The Committee established a ten-year term for the Supreme Leader, but the late Hashemi Rafsanjani demanded to revoke the limitation so that the Supreme Leader could rule for life.

Also in his letter, Karroubi said that a number of members of the Committee were about to expand the powers of the Supreme Leader by granting him the right to dissolve the parliament, but opponents to this plan thwarted it. Karroubi added, “When Khamenei was asked about the reasons why this proposal had not been put before the Committee, he said that the ones who agreed with the idea dismissed it as they knew it would be rejected”. Karroubi continued, “Had the project of granting the Supreme Leader the right to dissolve the parliament been successful, it is possible that he would have dissolved the third and sixth parliament.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Karroubi’s letter included other important issues as well such as:

- » He asked if the Assembly of Experts was aware of Khamenei’s strategy that had led Iran to what he described as being degraded.
- » He accused Khamenei of handing the country’s resources and capabilities to the IRGC and security services by permitting them to take control of Iran’s banking and oil sectors, as well as, to play a major role in supervising the country politically and economically.
- » He argued that the current conditions have improved the image and reputation of the Pahlavi regime. In addition, the current judiciary has become an instrument for repression and injustice.
- » He questioned the Supreme Leader on military personnel and Friday Imams interfering in state affairs.⁽¹¹⁾
- » He blamed the poor situation in Iran on Khamenei’s policies that took the country back to the pre-constitutional era adopted in 1906, When Shah Muzaffar Uddin, one of the Qajari kings that ruled Iran from 1795 to 1925, had limited powers then.⁽¹²⁾

Reactions

Karroubi’s critics rejected the allegations in his letter and said that the Constitution Amendment Committee formed by Khomeini before his death in 1989 was comprised of five prominent leftist personalities that were close to Karroubi. Also, they were all members of the Association of Combatant Clerics headed by Karroubi for many years before he resigned after the events of the 2009 presidential elections. The five personalities were Mir Hussein Mousavi, Mousavi Ardebili, Mousavi Khoiniha, Mohammad Reza Tavassoli, and Abdullah Nouri.⁽¹³⁾ The Committee had four reformist members of parliament as well- Hussein Hashemian, Bayat Zanjani, Hassan Habibi, and



Hadi Khamenei. Karroubi's critics said that his letter meant that he had accused nine of his friends and colleagues in the Constitution Amendment Committee of preparing the ground to add the term "Supreme" to "Velayat-e Faqih" in Article 57 of the Iranian constitution, as well as, revoking the ten-year duration period for the Supreme Leader.⁽¹⁴⁾

In a tweet, the Spokesperson of the Guardian Council, Abbas Kadkhodaei said that this letter reminded him of Karroubi's statements that he made during the events following the 2009 presidential elections. He sarcastically commented on the letter saying, "Karroubi did not write this letter. It seems it has been written for him same as his decisions that were being made for him." He added, "I wish he had freed himself from the ideas of those surrounding him and had been thinking, deciding, and writing by himself."⁽¹⁵⁾

Karroubi's former advisor, Mujtaba Vahidi who resides abroad, said that Karroubi's letter was far from the truth because he had to criticize Khomeini, the founder of Supreme Leadership (Velayat-e Faqih) theory. He added, "It seems that Karroubi was not able to remember this fact."⁽¹⁶⁾

On the other hand, approximately twenty-five reformist activists signed a letter titled, "Democratic Political Activists defense of Karroubi's Historical Letter" and posted it on the Kalimah website that is run by supporters of the reformist leader Mir Hussein Mousavi. The letter fully supported Karroubi's demands from the Assembly of Experts, especially its supervisory role over the Supreme Leader and the questioning of his policies. They criticized those calling for the Supreme Leader to be excluded from questioning as they believe such people wanted to disrupt the Constitution either intentionally or unintentionally.⁽¹⁷⁾

Reflections of Karroubi's frequent letters on his house arrest

Karroubi's attack on Khamenei is not the first of its kind. At the end of January 2018, he asked Khamenei to take responsibility for his administration's performance over the past three decades rather than criticizing its officials. Karroubi blamed Khamenei for the deterioration of the country's economic, cultural, political, and social affairs. He called on him to undertake extensive reforms.⁽¹⁸⁾

In May 2018, Karroubi criticized Khamenei in his letter to the Central Committee of the National Trust Party (Etemad Melli) and criticized the continuity of his house arrest.⁽¹⁹⁾

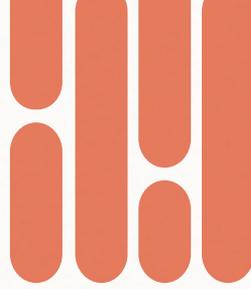
It seems that Karroubi's many letters sent to the Supreme Leader and to the Assembly of Experts have played a major role in keeping in place his house arrest and that of Mir Hussein Mousavi, and Zahra Rahnavard as stated by the Deputy Speaker of Iran's parliament, Ali Motahari in March 2018. In August 2018, some sources reported that Khamenei had rejected a decision by the Higher Council for National Security to revoke the house arrest on the leaders of the Green Movement in Iran.⁽²⁰⁾

The impact of Karroubi's letters on the future of the Iranian regime

The people's reaction to Karroubi's letters, particularly their relationship to the future of the Iranian regime differed. Some believed that Karroubi's letters could disrupt the status of the Supreme Leader among some of Iran's politicians and motivate people to cast more criticism on the Supreme Leader in the future considering the harsh economic conditions in the country that are likely to worsen in the upcoming period because of US sanctions.⁽²¹⁾ Khamenei possibly could ignore these letters, but they perhaps could constitute a turning point from criticism presented in an advisory way to demands for Khamenei to be removed.

Karroubi's letters could put Rouhani's government that is supported by reformists who are trying to approach the fundamentalists in a tight spot. This could be a major obstacle in fulfilling one of President Rouhani's most important pledges to the reformists of revoking the house arrest on Karroubi, Mir Hussein Mousavi and his wife Zahra Rahnavard.

On the other hand, many Iranians questioned Karroubi's silence on Khamenei's policies over the past years, saying that the big problem with Iranian officials is that they do not criticize the regime and its policies while in power, but once removed from office or differ with the Supreme Leader, they adopt a new position and start to cast criticism. Karroubi, this segment said, never dared to criticize Khamenei's policies when he was speaker of the Iranian parliament.



Military and Security File



Has the attack on the military parade in Ahvaz tarnished the powerful image of the IRGC?

On Saturday, September 22, 2018, the city of Ahvaz in Iran witnessed an attack by militants targeting a gathering of the Revolutionary Guards. The attack was carried out in person by the militants rather than by low-impact bombs that may or may not hit the intended target. The Iranian authorities did not understand how the IRGC was unable to detect the attack before it took place and rocked the country.⁽²²⁾

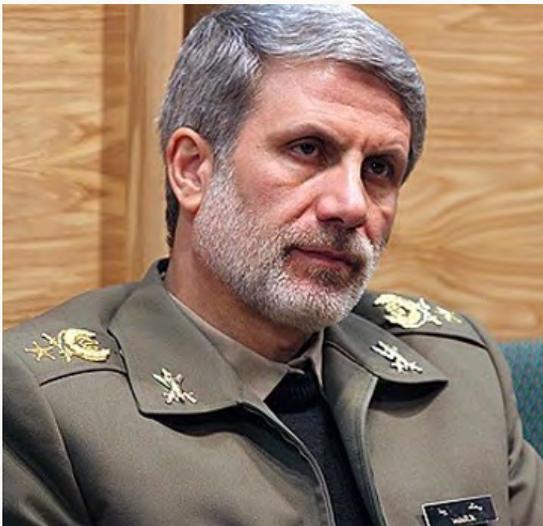
The attack came at a time when Iran was gripped by the re-imposition of sanctions by the United States, deteriorating economic conditions and widespread popular protests rejecting the regime's policies.

The attack belittled the prestige and self-image of the IRGC that it has been keen to consolidate inside Iran. It has been impressing on Iranian minds that it controls the country's security situation and that it is hard for militants to infiltrate by any means. But the contrary has been proved after the attack in Ahvaz. This attack sent a message to the IRGC leaders that there are still security loopholes. The attack was shocked officials. The IRGC apparatus is supposed to protect the state, as well as, its senior officials and

figures. But the apparatus found itself targeted by gunmen who directly confronted it. According to local sources, shooting continued for 12 minutes. This prompted the regime to accuse several countries including the US and the Gulf nations of being behind the attack. The attack became an obsession, with many questions raised on the weapons and their quantity, as well as, how they were transferred to the vicinity of the military parade. Were there any IRGC accomplices who facilitated the militants and sheltered them until the point of the attack?⁽²³⁾ In this respect, the Director General of the conservative *Juan* newspaper Abdullah Ghanji said that the attack in Ahvaz does not match the way separatists carry out attacks in Khuzestan. They always resorted to planting bombs or carrying out lightning attacks. He added, “They attack and kill until they get killed without leaving the scene. This is an ISIS tactic.” He asserted the necessity of being on the lookout for any ideological deviations by some separatist groups who have been edging closer to radical Islam in recent times.⁽²⁴⁾

The military and political officials started to realize the damage caused to the image of the IRGC. This prompted them to report a lower number of casualties than the actual number to maintain the reputation of the IRGC as it is considered the most important apparatus under the supervision of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Also, criticism of the IRGC post attack could embolden the people in the future, thus demolishing the state of fear and be open to opposing the regime.

As a result of previous attacks similar to the Ahvaz incident, a big part of the Iranian people believes that the Revolutionary Guard, as usual, would take advantage of the circumstances to consolidate its image and power as a security apparatus. This would happen through imposing more restraints on the public, expanding its clout and launching a crackdown against any reformists. Abroad, maybe it is difficult for the IRGC to carry out attacks for reprisal. They will be limited operations, not large-scale ones as it is the case with the attack on Syria’s Bokamal, which was carried out only a few days after the Ahvaz attack. The reason why such operations will be of a limited scope is that it will face external pressure by the United States. Therefore, the priority will be at home by cracking down on certain institutions and figures as well as hindering Rouhani’s attempts to bolster ties with the outside world.



The growing influence of the IRGC could pose a serious threat to the Iranian regime and Khamenei himself if it is not curbed. But it seems that the apparatus and its efficiency is strongly correlated with whether there are US sanctions or not. If sanctions persist its clout at home will not survive for a long time. But, this depends on whether Washington desires to curb Iranian expansionism temporary or permanently in the region.

The US has been asserting its position on Iran and the necessity for it to change its behavior in the region. It has asserted that it does not seek a regime change. The US



President Donald Trump reiterated on Tuesday that the Iranians have no choice but to change their behavior and that he looks forward to building a new relationship with Iran in the future if it proves serious about the desire to change its behavior. “I will not meet them before they change their approach,” he said in a statement to the United Nations. This will happen. I think they have no choice. We are looking forward to a good relationship with Iran, but that will not happen now. “Trump called on all governments to boycott and isolate Iran completely until it modifies its behavior, accusing its leadership of spreading” chaos, death, and destruction. “We ask all countries to isolate the Iranian regime as long as it continues its aggression,” he said.⁽²⁵⁾

Iranian missiles, drones attack Syria’s Bokamal

After accusing the Gulf nations, the US and ISIS, the IRGC issued a statement where it asserted it launched medium-range missiles of 650 to 700 kilometers. The missiles targeted ISIS positions in Syria. Despite all the statements confirming the attack, there are conflicting reports questioning whether there was an attack.

Multiple sources said that the last attack by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards used 7 missiles. A missile launcher of the IRGC’s Aerospace forces in western Iran, located 750 kilometers, away from the target, was used. Seven of the IRGC’s drones provided aerial support to destroy the targets. According to Fars News Agency, one of the drones used in the attack was of the Saiqa category.⁽²⁶⁾

Iran boasts of the capabilities of its own missiles and claims that they can hit any target from 700 to 750 kilometers, such as the Zulfikar, which it considers one of its successful “medium-range” missiles.

According to the information provided by the Revolutionary Guard, the missile is 8.86 meters long. Its diameter is 61 centimeters. Its weight is 3,450 kilograms. It

consumes solid fuel, with its speed nearing three times and a half of the speed of sound. Furthermore, many IRGC leaders believe that it is hard to destroy the mobile launches of the Zulfikar missile and that they are very precise missiles. They are capable of dodging jamming equipment and they are one of the categories of the Fateh missile. They are many categories of Fateh missile. Their range can hit targets from 300 to 750 kilometers.⁽²⁷⁾

Although the missile was manufactured on September 21st, 2016, it was first put on display during a military parade staged by the Iranian armed forces in Bandar Abbas. The missile is viewed by the IRGC as a high-precision one. Along with the Zulfikar, Iran classifies the Qiam missile as a medium-range one of 800 kilometers. Its speed is no more than double the speed of sound. It is heavier than the Zulfikar missile and its length is 11.45 meters. Its diameter is 88 centimeters. It weighs 4,280 kilograms. It consumes liquid fuel.⁽²⁸⁾

In conclusion, back to the issue of the Ahvaz attack, which was the most highlighted event in September, the Defense Minister Hatemi threatened that the response will be very harsh. This was echoed by the regional and international expert Hussein Rwaiuran. He said Iran will respond harshly to any military attacks that target its security and its people. He also noted that Iran has a strong presence on Syrian soil and it can carry out attacks whenever it wants. Instead, it resorted to missile operations as a show of military force. It wanted to send a message to its enemies that Tehran can hit any targets regardless of its geographical location. He added that Iran's presence in Syria is a form of power as Syria is one of the areas that has strong United State's clout. The Iranian missiles' hitting remote targets indicates the Iranian regime will follow a zero-tolerance policy towards any entity whatsoever and it will not let any threats to its national security go unpunished, even if these attacks are carried out by the United States itself.⁽²⁹⁾

The expert concluded that whoever threatens Iran's security will surely find a crushing response. Iran will not let anything that impacts its national security go unpunished. He went on to say that the terrorists seek to shake Iran's national security and indicated that the attack that targeted the city of Ahvaz that left many people dead and wounded was because of some security negligence. He urged vigilance and awareness of what is happening in Iran. He called for readiness to confront any terror attack because Iran's enemies will not stop planning attacks. Despite the few attacks claimed by ISIS on Iran, Iran claims it is targeted by ISIS and there should be precautionary measures to get rid of all the loopholes that could be exploited by its enemy in carrying out its attacks.⁽³⁰⁾

Economic File

The economic file for the month of September in its first part deals with the economic importance of Ahvaz for the Iranian regime. Also, it deals with the possible reaction to maintain the stability of the region after the recent attack. The second part will, in brief, discuss the recent developments witnessed in some economic sectors and their repercussions.

First Part: Ahvaz's economic importance for the Iranian regime and its reaction to security threats.

This part seeks to monitor and analyze the economic importance of Ahvaz for Iran and its impact on the political system. This part proceeds from the basis that the economic importance of Ahvaz for Iran's economy and its people is a key motive for the regime to do anything possible to control and continue to benefit from Ahvaz's abundant resources



Ahvaz

Source: Google Maps

The total population of the region is estimated at about 4.7 million people⁽³¹⁾ (According to the 2016 census, while others say it is 12 million people).⁽³²⁾ The majority of the population is Arab. This variation in statistics is a moot point between the government and the region. But it is not the only problem between them. Ahvazi opposition groups accuse the Iranian regime of deliberately obliterating the Arab identity of the region, changing its demographic makeup⁽³³⁾ in favor of other ethnicities and seizing its economic, agricultural and water resources. They also complain of the region's relative lack of infrastructure and development compared to other Iranian regions.⁽³⁴⁾ This is in addition to the region residents' suffering from unemployment and poverty, which is rampant especially among the Arabs in the region.⁽³⁵⁾



Ahvaz is of great importance to the Iranian regime and for the country's economy as a whole, with its water, oil, mineral, agricultural and commercial resources. In other words, the region provides the regime with all essentials required to run the economy. In the coming lines we will detail some of the region's economic resources:

- 1. Water Resources:** The region includes five large rivers that make up more than a third of the running water in Iran, including the rivers Karun, Karakha, and Gerahi.
- 2. Oil, Gas, and Electricity:** The region is the source of energy production and exports in Iran. The region accounts for 87% of the country's oil production, 90% of gas production and 74% of electricity production by dams and natural resources.⁽³⁶⁾
- 3. Ports and Trade:** The region includes four ports overlooking the Arabian Gulf, and are one of the most important supply ports for the exports and imports of Iran.⁽³⁷⁾ Within ten months (March 17 - January 2018) the region sold non-oil exports worth about \$ 6 billion. And it received imports worth \$ 6.2 billion during the same period. It accrued more than \$ 61 million in customs revenues for the state treasury. These figures seem perfectly normal if we know 80% of Iran's imports enter the country by the port of Imam Khomeini in the province.⁽³⁸⁾
- 4. Industries and Minerals:** The region is an important hub for Iranian petrochemical, iron, steel and building material industries, as well as food industries such as sugar.



Ahvaz

Source: Iran Front Page

5. Agricultural Resources: The many rivers in the region made it affluent in terms of agricultural crops. The crops include wheat, sugar, palm-trees, fruits, and vegetables. Several Arab farmers have been forced from their home after their lands were seized in favor of major agricultural firms.⁽³⁹⁾

From the foregoing, we can conclude the region is the richest and most important spot for the stability of the Iranian regime economically and politically. Also, the resources of the region benefit Iran's population nearing 81 million.

Ahvaz unrest and the regime's obsessions

Any disturbance in the region raises the sensitivity of the Iranian regime for fear of the growing strength of the Arab opposition there. It fears separatist calls in the most important region for the Iranian economy. This is because there are historical differences regarding whether this region is part of Iran. Many historians have said that this area, Ahvaz, is not part of Iran. It is mostly mountainous. The proof for this is the similarity between this territory in terms of its climate, economy, and topography to its neighboring Arab and Iraqi territory more than to Iran.⁽⁴⁰⁾ There are other factors such as language, culture, habits, customs, and history. This is a lengthy issue that needs more detail.

There are recent incidents in the region that have targeted economic assets of the Iranian regime. In July 2016, the largest petrochemical complex in Iran was bombed in the Ahvazi city of Mahshahr.⁽⁴¹⁾ On January 3, 2017, the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz claimed the bombing of the Ahvaz oil pipeline. It is a movement opposed to Iran's presence in Arabistan and is based in Europe. In November, Iran assassinated a leader of the movement in The Hague.

The possible reactions of the Iranian regime to maintain the stability of the region

On September 22, 2018, in the city of Ahvaz, the IRGC came under armed attack during the anniversary of the Iran-Iraq war. The attack killed dozens of soldiers and civilians.

The attack was a blow to the IRGC, the most important military formation at home and abroad in Iran. The attack brought to memory the bombings in the region, most of which have been linked to the Ahvazi opposition at home and abroad. The latest of these bombings took place a year and a half ago. The attack disclosed security loopholes exploited to undermine the stability of the regime. Therefore, the IRGC declared in a statement that its response will be crushing and unforgettable.

The regime's reprisal will be internal to forestall any future attacks in the region that stir up disturbances. The regime has already launched a crackdown where dozens of Ahvazis have been arrested. There is no doubt dozens of them will be sentenced to death later. Maybe there will be assassinations against opposition figures especially the Ahvazis.

The Iranian reaction may extend to beyond its borders, targeting organizations such as ISIS and even capitals such as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.⁽⁴²⁾ When it comes to responding to ISIS, it has already taken place on October 1st when the IRGC launched several medium-range ballistic missiles at eastern Syria. Iran said the missiles were fired in response to the Ahvaz attack.⁽⁴³⁾

When it comes to striking targets inside Arab nations, such as Riyadh and Abu-Dhabi, who denied links to the incident, there are two theorems:

First, the Iranian regime may launch retaliatory strikes against them or at one of them. The motive of the strike may be to seek revenge on the United States allies in the region as the second package of US sanctions are about to hit Iran's oil exports. The Iranian regime has threatened that it will not allow Arab oil to pass through the Strait of Hormuz if its oil exports are halted. It is not necessary Iran will confine its strikes to the political capitals-as it did before through firing missiles at the Saudi capital Riyadh through its proxy militia in Yemen-but the strikes may be extended to hit economic capitals that include key economic and oil facilities. The regime may also target diplomatic missions. Therefore, there should be tight security measures to prevent any possible hostile acts by the Iranian regime.

The second possibility is that Tehran is deliberately rendering the identity of the perpetrators mysterious for it to respond in different ways to achieve multiple unannounced aims at home and abroad. Omir Keremi, the Director of Intelligence at the Israeli cybersecurity company, subscribes to this opinion. He wrote about it in a piece published by the Washington Institute for Near East Studies.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The article was based on tracing historical incidents where the Iranian regime accused Washington and Riyadh of being behind certain incidents.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Then the regime strikes targets away from these countries to achieve other aims such as cracking down on opponents at home or sending a message to deter some regional parties.

In the end, putting all that together leads us to three important conclusions:

First: The Ahvaz region, without a doubt, is the most important economic zone in Iran. To a big extent, the economy's functioning and the everyday life of the people depends on the oil, agricultural and industrial resources of the region. Thus, the regime could do anything to maintain stability in the region and to guarantee its subordination This will happen through harsh security measures.

Second: Eliminating the cells or voices of the Ahvazi opposition at home and abroad

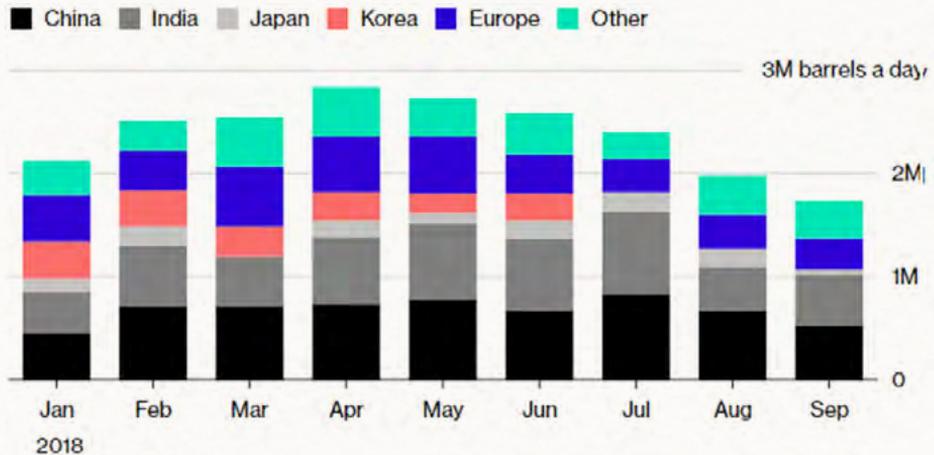
(Europe) will be the most likely Iranian response. This at the same time will send warning messages to the other ethnic minorities in Iran. However, this does not prevent tightening security measures around key economic targets in the Gulf nations to avoid any hostile acts by Iran as the second phase of the US sanctions approaches quickly.

Third: Any attempt to cease the flow of oil -for example as one of the region's resources-is more dangerous than any US sanctions that the Iranian regime could circumvent and find a way out from it. However, the halting of the resources of the region means paralyzing the economy and life in Iran at a stunning pace.

Second Part: developments in different sectors during this month

Oil Sector

Iran's oil exports have continued to fall sharply in recent months, with sales falling for two months in a row (August and September) to less than 2 million barrels a day as many international companies withdrew following US sanctions against the Iranian regime. Iran's oil exports and condensates have fallen more than 30 percent from April to September. And Iran's oil exports have fallen by 870,000 bpd since last April as imports from China, India, Japan, South Korea, Europe, and other countries declined, as shown in the following figure:



Source: Bloomberg tanker tracking

The sanctions undermine the refineries and petrochemical plants designed to process Iranian oil. This is evident in the case with South Korea, where Iran's high-sulfur capacitor, a light form of oil extracted from gas fields, is an important raw material for the country's petrochemical industry. South Korea bought nearly 60 percent of Iran's total exports until April. Since then it has had to rely on distant sources such as Norway and the United States.⁽⁴⁶⁾

In this context, the President of the Japan Oil Association and the Chairman of the Board of Edemitsu Kosanta, Kashi Tsukioka, said on Thursday, September 20, 2018, that US sanctions will not affect Japanese refineries, adding that the Japanese refineries will stop receiving Iranian oil. He noted that the last shipment of Iranian

oil will arrive in the first half of October. And it is expected that the Japanese refineries will settle their oil trade with Iran by the end of November 2nd, due to the implementation of US sanctions which will take effect as of November 5th.⁽⁴⁷⁾ With regard to the US license for the British-Iran gas project, which ended on Sept. 30, BP is scheduled to transfer its stake in the field and two other fields for \$ 403 million to Serica Energy.

It is worth noting that Serica Energy official website announced it extended the license to offer services and sale of equipment to the project (Rhum) only until November 4, where US sanctions will take effect, and it is not clear if this project will continue after that. And it is not clear what will be the fate of this project after this date.⁽⁴⁸⁾

In a move considered one of the most important indicators in the oil sector, the Iranian authorities intend to build the port of Gask on the Sea of Oman, which will be the second largest oil export port with an investment of up to \$ 2.5 billion. The step was described by the Iranian president as a strategic decision.

“As US sanctions approach Iran, Iran wants to move away from the Strait of Hormuz and move its oil export facilities to the Gulf of Oman in the port of Gask, to circumvent the US sanctions war,” an Italian newspaper wrote in its analysis of the situation. It is worth noting that Iran confirmed reports of developing the Gask port. It is one of the projects which will aim to mitigate the impact of US sanctions on its oil exports.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The strategic importance of this port for the Iranian regime lies in the fact that it will be a tool for the Iranian regime to curb sanctions. It wants to send a message that its oil exports will not be affected in case the Strait of Hormuz is closed. We should not forget the EU’s attempts to find a backdoor for economic transactions with Iran and circumvent sanctions imposed on the Iranian regime.

Non-Oil Sector

According to a report by the Iranian customs authorities, non-oil exports of Iran increased by 23 billion and 123 million dollars in the first half of this year compared to last year. During this period, Iran’s non-oil exports amounted to 56.644 million tons, \$ 23. 123billion.

Compared to the volume of exports last year, a 13% increase has been posted, while imported goods reached 16.22 million tons worth \$ 22.182 billion. The report also states that Iranian exports targeted five countries. The countries were China (\$ 4.633 billion with a share of 20.4 percent), Iraq (\$ 4.564 billion with a share of 19.7 percent), the UAE (\$ 4.063 billion with a share of 17.75 percent), Afghanistan (\$ 1.668 billion with a share of 7.22 percent) and India (\$ 1.255 billion with a share of 5.43 percent).⁽⁵⁰⁾

On the trade between Iran and Iraq, the Head of the Iran-Iraq Chamber of Commerce Yahiya Ishaq announced during the Trade Summit between Iran and Iraq the increase in Iranian exports to Iraq compared to last year. The rate of exports to Iraq reached \$ 4. 165 billion in the first half of this year, compared to \$ 3.1 billion in the same period last year.⁽⁵¹⁾

With regard to the currency exchange rate, the currency market in Iran witnessed an increase in the foreign exchange rate of more than 16,000 Tomans against the US dollar. This caused some exchange officers to refuse to sell foreign currency in late September. The exchange rate of the sterling pound exceeded 20, 000 tomans.

According to analysts, this rise is a result of the attack on the military parade in Ahvaz, the impasse in EU-Iran talks, the ambiguous anti-money laundering laws and the decline in oil imports.

Some Iranian fundamentalists point to Rouhani's speech at the United Nations. They say it is one of the causes of Iran's currency declining against foreign currency, while the economic plans of the Rouhani government in recent months have failed to control the exchange rate. However, the head of the central bank said "the foreign exchange market is under control. This situation suggested that the currency is heading for decline."⁽⁵²⁾

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ARAB AFFAIR

Syria

Idlib: Displacement and the understanding of the Sochi participants

Idlib has been at the core of interactions in resolving the Syrian crisis and was the pivotal issue in Russia-Iran-Turkey talks in September 2018, as it is the only city beyond government control. Following Russian airstrikes and the ground-siege imposed by Iranian forces, Iranian-backed militias, and Assad's forces, all the opposition forces were displaced to Idlib.

Eliminating the opposition forces in Idlib: the ultimate displacement

Some believe that the Syrian army's invasion of Idlib is the beginning of a settlement and will herald the return of Syrian statehood. While others believe, it is an ultimate catastrophe, particularly for the opposition forces and will eventually result in a more devastating massacre than that of Aleppo despite international endeavors to prevent this from happening.

The looming attack on Idlib arose in early September 2018 when Russia launched airstrikes against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), once known as Nusra Front. These airstrikes were accompanied by regime rocket and artillery fire, in the city of Jisr ash-Shugur in Idlib. However, Turkey sent more armor to Idlib to support and supply the opposition forces.⁽¹⁾

The Assad regime was only in control of 16% of Syrian territory when Russia entered the war in September 2015. In late March 2018, it retook control over 47% of Syrian territory. Russian President Vladimir Putin announced in September 2018 that they had eliminated the terrorist groups saying, "More than 90% of Syria's territory is already free from terrorists."⁽²⁾ When the Russians participated in the war in Syria, they did not only launch airstrikes and provide air cover to Iran and its militias but they also planned the forced displacement of Syrians and opposition forces to the Syrian regime.

The stages of forced displacement:

The displacement started from the Waer district in Homs, the nearest opposition-controlled territory to the Russian-run Khmeimim Air Base.⁽³⁾ Russia had not evacuated it completely from the opposition forces but by March 2017, it was successful in doing so. The second stage in the displacement process was the suburbs controlled by the opposition forces in Damascus and its outskirts. The final stage was in Aleppo, the largest and most strategically significant city controlled by the opposition forces.

opposition-controlled territories evacuated	Date of displacement	Number of displaced
Waer, north-west of Homs	December 2015-March 2017	12,000 of the population including 3,000 opposition fighters. ⁽⁴⁾
Darayya in Western Ghouta, Damascus.	August 2016	Thousands were displaced to Qudsaya and Kiswah and 700 fighters with their families were displaced to Idlib. ⁽⁵⁾

opposition-controlled territories evacuated	Date of displacement	Number of displaced
Khan al-Shih and Zakiyah in Rif Dimashq.	November 2016	1200 fighters were displaced to Idlib. ⁽⁶⁾
Qudsaya and Hamah in Rif Dimashq	October 2016	3500 people were displaced, including 350 fighters. ⁽⁷⁾
Muadamiyat Sham in Rif Dimashq	November 2016	1500 fighters with their families were displaced. ⁽⁸⁾
Al-Tall in Rif Dimashq	December 2016	4000 fighters with their families were displaced. ⁽⁹⁾
Aleppo	December 2016	50,000 people were displaced. ⁽¹⁰⁾
Wadi Barada	January 2017	1200 fighters were displaced. ⁽¹¹⁾
Zabadani and Madaya	April 2017	3000 people were displaced. ⁽¹²⁾

Illegitimate goals:

The policy to push the opposition forces into Idlib was to attain specific goals and was not indeed to remove the siege nor to prevent airstrikes against civilians across Syria. The opposition forces had no choice but to accept the displacement, and to protect the civilians residing in their territories. Although they realized that Idlib was to be a battlefield to slaughter them, the goals behind their displacement were clear from the beginning. **The most prominent were:**

- » To gather the opposition forces in one specific area so that the regime could benefit from its air force superiority.
- » To reduce the combat capability of the opposition forces by them handing over their medium-heavy weapons –according to the displacement agreement.
- » To carry out a detailed statistical study on opposition forces members to eliminate them completely, before they blended in with the civilians in the settlement phase, by registering their names.
- » To change the demographic composition in Syria and to settle Shia population around Damascus and in other strategic territories.

Neglecting international law

From the very beginning, the United Nations rejected the internal displacement in Syria and withdrew from the Waer's agreement in



June 2016 because it called for displacement.⁽¹³⁾ However, with repeated displacements, the United Nations turned a blind eye to this crisis, because it became an alternative reality to an expected genocide. The mounting death toll from the airstrikes targeting the opposition forces made the displacement inevitable while the international community remained silent about the Russian-Iranian airstrikes. It is worth to mention here that some regional countries like Turkey and Qatar sponsored some of the displacement agreements, by mediation, negotiation, or observation posts.

Unfair terms:

Most of the displacement agreements included a security settlement for residents who were not displaced.⁽¹⁴⁾ According to the conditions of the security settlement, they must surrender themselves to the authorities so that investigations can take place to conclude whether they participated in the uprising or not. No doubt, there will be torture or at least humiliation in investigation process.

In addition, the agreement conditions included obligatory military service for young men residing in the regime-recaptured territories, as well as, the re-recruitment of soldiers who had deserted the army unless they had participated in actions against the regime.

Upon the aforementioned terms, most of the opposition forces were disarmed, pushing the door wide open for illegal detention and torture. Post-Aleppo battle, Iranian forces attacked the displaced people in exchange for the Shia who were caught up in Kafriya and Al-Fu'ah surrounding Idlib. This was repeated in all of the displacements carried out in Zabadani and Madaya.⁽¹⁵⁾

The largest opposition gathering:

Idlib's catastrophe stems from its demographic composition, which has been turned into a prison cell for both innocent civilians and fighters. An estimated 3.69 million people live in Idlib; nearly one million were forced to flee their homes.⁽¹⁶⁾

The displaced, represent all the opposition forces including the most radical ones— who according to Russia, Turkey and Iran belong to ISIS [IS] or al-Qaeda. Also, the radical groups include HTS, the largest armed group controlling 70% of Idlib, Jund al-Aqsa, a group that defected from ISIS and joined HTS, the pro-al-Qaeda Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), Badiya Army, a group that defected from HTS in 2017, and the pro-HTS Liwa al-Haqq.⁽¹⁷⁾

The justification for Idlib's attack as Turkey increases the number of its troops

In addition to finalizing the displacement of the opposition factions, the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran announced their goals behind the attack on Idlib. Russia seeks to grant the Assad regime absolute sovereignty over Syria's territory and eliminate radical opposition forces. Iran aims to strengthen the Assad regime in Syria and continue with its demographic-change project. On the other hand, Turkey explicitly supports the opposition forces in Idlib. Post-Aleppo battle, Turkey increased its military presence in Idlib. This is in the backdrop of the three key actors, Iran, Russia, and Turkey have reached a meaningful level of mutual understanding at the Astana talks, that began in early 2017. The Astana talks reached their 10th round on July 31, 2018, at Sochi. The most significant achievement in the ten rounds was that of the 4th round, that took place in May 2017, where the three guarantors agreed to establish four de-escalation zones, including Idlib. According to the agreement, Turkey increased its military presence and



established observation posts in Idlib. At the 7th round of Astana, October 2017, Turkey was put in charge of Idlib's internal security.⁽¹⁸⁾

Destabilizing partnership and international objection

With the Idlib attack looming, the Turkish-Iranian-Russian alliance faced its ultimate challenge. Turkey could not overlook the attacks of the Iranian-backed militias nor the Russian airstrikes on Idlib. Given the massive expected bloodshed, Turkey said that the presence of radical groups does not justify launching an attack on Idlib, stressing that it will not keep watching and will not allow the Aleppo massacre to be repeated in Idlib. An attack on Idlib would be considered an attack on Turkey itself, a Turkish source confirmed.⁽¹⁹⁾ Turkey put the Free Syrian Army (FSA) troops on the highest alert. The Turkish-backed FSA, established in 2018, now includes 30,000 fighters and they are deployed in the areas of the two Turkish operations; Operation Euphrates Shield and Olive Tree. Turkey announced that 20,000 soldiers will join its troops in Idlib.⁽²⁰⁾

Russia expressed its rejection to the Turkish position on Idlib, as it was the first to start airstrikes on Idlib. In estimating Turkey's reaction to the attack, Russia took into consideration Turkey's financial crisis, its strained relations with the West, and its dependence on Iran's oil and gas, as well as, Turkey not being prepared to end its alliance with Russia at this critical juncture.⁽²¹⁾

However, Turkey moved against Russian expectations. It reinforced its military presence in Idlib and put the opposition forces on highest alert. Apparently, the Turks were striving hard to avoid a massive loss that would result after their withdrawal leaving the opposition forces as easy prey for Assad and his allies. The ramifications of Turkey's withdrawal from Idlib are as follows:

- » The collapse of Turkey's credibility and undermining its international and regional position;
- » Lose its advanced military positions in northern Syria that would weaken its ability to curb Kurdish influence and increase the ambition of the Kurds in Turkey for separation as an independent state;
- » Face a new wave of refugees, that would be the largest since the breakout of the Syrian

crisis;

» The opposition forces may be motivated for revenge attacks on Turkey because the latter betrayed their mutual alliance. Turkey has already faced such attacks during the Syrian crisis.

At an international level, the United States has not changed its opposition to the Idlib attack. The U.S. President Donald Trump warned the Assad regime against a “reckless attack” on Idlib. “President Bashar Assad of Syria must not recklessly attack the Idlib Province. The Russians and Iranians would be making a grave humanitarian mistake to take part in this potential human tragedy. Hundreds of thousands of people could be killed.⁽²²⁾ Don’t let that happen!” Trump tweeted. Up to this point, the United States did not express any intention for intervening in this attack whether by its proxies or troops, unless the Assad regime used chemical weapons. The U.S. State Department Spokesperson Heather Nauert told reporters in Washington that the U.S. “will respond to any verified chemical weapons use in Idlib or elsewhere in Syria... in a swift and appropriate manner.”⁽²³⁾ The European Union aligned with the American position, European Union foreign policy Chief Federica Mogherini and the U.N. special envoy for Syria Steffan de Mistura, during their meeting, discussed a plan to prevent the Assad regime’s attack on Idlib.⁽²⁴⁾ This was too late; the Russian airstrikes struck resulting in massive civilian casualties.

Tehran Meeting: failure to negotiate in the presence of Iran

Despite the expected confrontation between (Russia and Assad) from one side and (Turkey and Syrian opposition) from the other, Iranian movements clearly indicated a desire to carry out an attack on Idlib and persuade Turkey to abandon the Syrian opposition since the beginning of September 2018. On the internal level, perhaps to achieve a victory similar to Aleppo to reduce the popular resistance that rejects Iran’s intervention in Syria and demands that the regime resolves the economic crisis instead of wasting money to impose its influence abroad, which will undoubtedly unravel at some point. Externally, Iran sought a victory in Idlib to affect the regional balance of power and show the ability to pass its own plans despite US pressure and sanctions, thus strengthening its regional position. Therefore, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif shuttled between Damascus, Ankara, and Moscow to prepare for the Tehran meeting on September 7, 2018.

Flying from Ankara, Zarif visited Damascus on September 2 and held consultations with the Turkish and Syrian presidents on the status quo in Idlib.⁽²⁵⁾ Zarif did not forgo the chance to discuss the reconstruction projects, which Iran intends to implement in Syria; Tehran sees that reconstruction projects will compensate the expenses which Iran has incurred during the Syrian war.⁽²⁶⁾

The Tehran Meeting’s Agenda

President Erdogan at the Tehran meeting had only one demand to force a cease-fire. He said in his speech, “Any attack launched or to be launched on Idlib will result in a disaster, massacre and a very big humanitarian tragedy, will eliminate any political solution for the Syrian crisis.” “The attack on Idlib violates the spirit on which the Astana talks were built,” he added.⁽²⁷⁾ Erdogan stressed the inclusion of a cease-fire in Article III of the final communiqué. “We should call on the armed factions in Idlib to lay down their weapons to establish a lasting peace in the region, not to attack the opposition and enter into an open conflict with it,” Erdogan said.⁽²⁸⁾

Erdogan wanted to depart from the tripartite alliance with Iran and Russia forgetting that there is an implicit agreement with them, which proves that this alliance is phased because of their different objectives, and the moment came for Turkey to depart from the alliance, and the next would be Iran, followed by, Russia, that has full control over Syria.

Putin responded that he opposed a cease-fire because the Nusra Front and ISIS in Idlib are not included in potential peace talks. He added that Syria must regain control over its entire territory. “I think that Erdogan is right, but I cannot talk on behalf of Nusra or ISIS terrorists to say that they will agree to a cease-fire or use bomb-equipped drones.”⁽²⁹⁾

Through his words, Putin wanted to implicitly accuse Erdogan of speaking in the name of the terrorists and negotiating on their behalf. If there is a moderate opposition in Idlib, he cannot negotiate on its behalf. Therefore, Putin rejected the Turkish demand. Then Putin threw the ball at Erdogan’s court to see whether he will accept the Russian-Iranian response or whether he will take measures to direct events towards direct war.

Also, Rouhani wanted to ignore a cease-fire, so he emphasized a new constitution for Syria along with discussing ways of Syrian refugees returning.⁽³⁰⁾ Erdogan disagreed with having such a discussion because he believed that these issues cannot be discussed while parties of the Syrian crisis were about to launch an attack on 3.5 million Syrians. If the Syrian opposition is displaced into Idlib, where will they go after the attack? Alternatively, will it be an inevitable trap? Moreover, will they have another choice except for surrender or die?

Final Communiqué

In the end, the final communiqué of the tripartite meeting in Tehran came out in twelve articles that did not stipulate a cease-fire condition. The ultimate goal was to pledge to preserve the independence and unity of Syrian territories and to ensure cooperation among the parties to eliminate the Nusra Front, and ISIS, as well as, all the individuals and groups belonging to al-Qaeda.

Also, a goal was to start the work of the Syrian Constitution Development Committee, assist Syrian refugees, and to continue the spirit of cooperation between the three countries, with the next session of talks to be held in Russia.⁽³¹⁾

The issuance of the communiqué and the Turkish president’s signature on it could have implied Turkish acquiescence towards an attack on Idlib, but Turkish military movements after the end of the tripartite meeting in Tehran confirmed the failure of the meeting and the possibility of a clash between the parties is as strong as it was before.

Turkish military movements and the removal of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham:

One day after the end of the Tehran tripartite talks, Turkey mobilized its forces towards Idlib, which included a number of tanks, armored vehicles, rocket launchers, and ammunition to support Turkish troops stationed there.⁽³²⁾ At the same time, Turkey carried out a limited attack on



HTS sites in cooperation with the moderate opposition factions, to open the M5 and M4 road connecting Aleppo, Damascus, and Latakia through Idlib to confirm that Turkey will resist the terrorist groups in Idlib.⁽³³⁾

The Sochi Agreement and the Establishment of a Demilitarized Zone:

The Turkish and Russian positions on Idlib did not prevent their departure from a common point: the desire to get rid of terrorist groups in Idlib. Only ten days after the failure of the Tehran meeting, it was followed by a military escalation from all parties (Russia, Bashar Assad's regime, Iran, Turkey, and the armed opposition). The Russian and Turkish presidents headed for a bilateral meeting in Sochi on September 17.⁽³⁴⁾

The text of the agreement reads as follows:

First: The establishment of a “demilitarized zone” in Idlib by 15 October, along the line of contact between the regime's forces and the opposition factions at a width of 15 to 20 kilometers.

Second: The withdrawal of militants from the region, including HTS.

Third: This area extends along the administrative border of Idlib with the governorates of Aleppo (north) and Hama (central) and Latakia (west).

Fourth: Within 10 days of the next month, “all opposition factions” will have to clear the zone of heavy weapons, and let Turkish army units and Russian military police to take them.⁽³⁵⁾

Removing Iran and a test for Turkey:

Perhaps the success of the Sochi Agreement lies in the Russian ability to engage and exclude Iran at any stage of the negotiations with Turkey, that can be traced to either full Iranian submission to Russia or a deep understanding between them. Russia convinced Iran that the Sochi Agreement is a phased agreement but Turkey's failure to implement its provisions is significant. Zarif did not find it difficult to say that Iran was always at the center of consultations on Syria, but did not say specifically whether there was consultation with Iran regarding the Sochi Agreement and the development of a demilitarized zone in Idlib.⁽³⁶⁾ Assad stressed that it was an interim agreement through which the state would achieve many field gains primarily to prevent bloodshed.⁽³⁷⁾ This is as if Assad had participated in or signed the terms of the agreement when it is known that he was not invited to attend the Sochi talks.

The Sochi Agreement has proved that both Iran and Assad regime cannot discuss the crucial issues of the situation in Syria and that Russia can take any decision on Syria away from Assad and Iran. Moreover, one cannot ignore the fact that Russia enforced Turkey to de-weaponize 15 to 20 kilometers of the region, and to guarantee the



existence of Russian military police, along with Turkish army units there.

Future Scenarios of the agreement:

First Scenario: The collapse of the agreement and the invasion of Idlib

There is no doubt that the armed opposition factions that have been displaced from different regions of Syria to Idlib fear this agreement and may see a new phase of elimination with Russia and Assad wanting to impose their control over the entire Syrian territory. According to the intensive existence of HTS and pro-Qaeda groups, it is expected that violence will erupt at any time, which will result in the agreement being revoked and Assad's forces rushing in to invade Idlib. In this case, Turkey will have only two options. The first option is to engage in a direct war with Russia, Assad, and Iran. This stage is tainted and Turkey will have no ability to negotiate with Russia again with the same tone that enabled it to reach a cease-fire agreement and develop a demilitarized zone. The second option is the withdrawal from Idlib in full or placement in specific areas, wherein radical opposition forces could attack Turkish forces in retaliation, and then the equation will turn completely and Turkey will abandon the opposition forces.

Second Scenario: The success of the agreement and the opposition's commitment to it

In this case, while ensuring a bloody massacre is avoided, Turkey will have to wage a war against extremist groups, which may be followed by waves of terrorist attacks on Turkey's interior. If Turkey cannot disrupt the groups and convince their members to abandon extremist ideas, Assad's regime will not tolerate them. The militants who have been forcibly displaced from various parts of Syria will cling to the option of separating Idlib from Syria and possibly joining Turkish territory which will pose a security threat to Assad.

Third Scenario: Assad could move towards a new constitution for Syria achieve a national reconciliation process that facilitates the integration of Idlib voluntarily with the rest of the Syrian territory, thus ends the crisis peacefully away from armed violence.

The third scenario is closer to utopia given Assad's actions in the crisis and the Iranian, Russian and Turkish plans in the region. The second scenario is also difficult to achieve as HTS controls 70% of Idlib along with other groups rush into suicidal confrontations. Turkey is already making strong efforts to contain them, but HTS remains the solid bloc of the opposition in Idlib. Thus the first scenario, despite its tragedy, is the closest to occur, with the provision of safe areas for civilians to reduce the magnitude of the tragedy and eventually end the greatest tragedy of forced displacement since World War II.

Iraq

Basra's protests flare up as a new Iraqi government forms

The 2018 Iraqi Parliament held its first session to elect the president, prime minister and speaker of the parliament. On September 3, protests simultaneously flared up across oil-rich Basra, a Shiite majority city, over Baghdad's failure to address water and power shortages and the crisis of unemployment. The protests hastened decisions made in Baghdad to consolidate new parliamentary blocs and form the new Iraqi government.

Iraq's political scene

On September 1, the two biggest blocs in parliament fought over how to form the new government. Each bloc claimed a majority in parliament. The two parliamentary blocs referred to here are:

1- The Reform and Reconstruction Coalition, led by Moqtada Sadr's Sa'iroun Alliance, Haider Abadi's [Nasr] Victory Alliance, Ammar Hakim's National Wisdom Movement, Ayad Allawi's Wataniya Coalition, Usama Nujaifi's Iraqi Qarar, and other coalitions like Bayariq Khair, Nineveh Our Identity, Anbar Is Our Identity, and the Iraqi Turkmen Front. The bloc claimed that it formed a majority in parliament with 177 MPs in the 328-seat parliament.⁽⁵⁸⁾ At least one plus 165 seats are needed to form a majority bloc in the Iraqi parliament.⁽⁵⁹⁾

2- The Construction Coalition led by Hadi Amiri's Fatah Coalition and Nouri Maliki's State of Law Coalition, Faleh Fayyad's Nasr coalition, and Irada and Wataniya. The bloc announced forming a majority bloc in the parliament with 145 MPs.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The majority cannot be gained but by receiving half plus one; the question raised here then is, "How would 145 MPs form a majority bloc?" If the parliamentary bloc is formed by the largest coalition that won in the elections-despite of the withdrawal of some members- or by counting the current members in the largest coalition, by this count the Construction Coalition is unable to form the largest bloc.⁽⁴¹⁾

It is clear now that two main blocs emerged out of the political tensions in Iraq. The Construction Coalition maneuvers to keep Iraq within the Iranian sphere of influence, given that members of the bloc offer Iran the ability to pursue expansionist projects in Iraq. The Reform and Reconstruction Coalition seek to bring Iraq back to the Arab world, protect the country's Arab identity and cut across the narrow-sectarian divisions that have dismembered Iraq and destabilize its national security since 2003.

The recent Basra protests have aggravated the political conflicts in Iraq and pushed the Iraqi government back to square one trying to consolidate a new government. New political coalitions have emerged in this midst. The Supreme Shiite Marja'yah did not name Abadi for a second term as a prime minister. Since then Iraq has been in waiting for the new prime minister Adil Abdulmahdi to address the challenges that have hampered the country. Key challenges involve water and power shortages, unemployment, reconstruction of the territories liberated from ISIS, fighting corruption, and resolving the political conflict between the two major competing blocs.

Return of protests, motives, and demands

The protests back on the streets of Basra charging the Iraqi government of failing to tackle the country's main crises was an extension of earlier protests in Basra on July 9, 2018. Below is a summary of key challenges confronting the province of Basra: Water crisis:

Strategically located next to the Shatt al-Arab waterway stretching to the Arabian Gulf Sea, Basra, popularly called the 'Venice of the East,' suffers from chronic water shortages and salinization.

Water shortages: Since the 1970s, Iraq has had water shortages caused by the dams that Turkey built on the Euphrates and Tigris River, including the Ilisu Dam on the Tigris River and the Keban Dam on the Euphrates, reducing flow to the Little Zab River in Iraq and Iran.⁽⁴²⁾

Salinization: There is an extended saline tongue running up the Shatt al-Arab river due

to the scarce flow of water from the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers' tributaries running from Iran and Turkey. Successive Iraqi governments have not repaired broken desalination plants or been able to acquire new desalination equipment to meet increasing water demands in the southern governorates.⁽⁴³⁾ These demands further exacerbate the problem of water salinization. Power crisis:

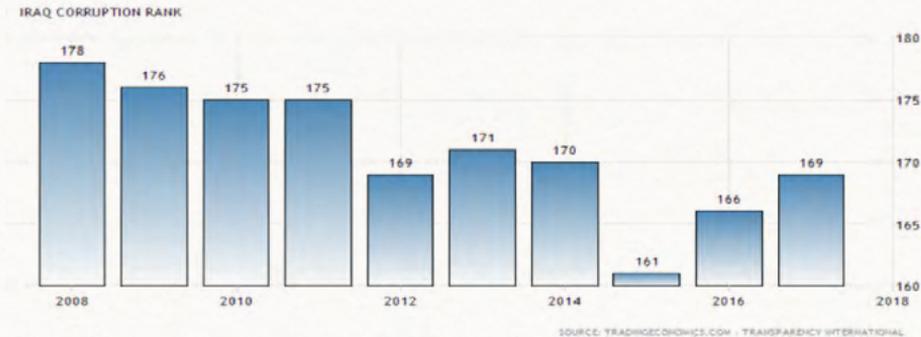
The bubbling Iraqi discontent increased over the frequent power blackouts during the summer as temperatures hit 129.2 degrees (54 Celsius). Basra receives only 75% of its 3000 megawatts (MW) needed to meet its daily power demand. Iran aggravated the power crisis in Basra by halting supplies of electricity to Iraq that had been importing the electricity at around 1500-2000 MW to make up for power shortages.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Unemployment crisis:

Though Basra is the economic capital of Iraq, and holds about 70% of Iraq's oil reserves (that is 65 billion barrels of oil),⁽⁴⁵⁾ and is home to Iraq's five major seaports, its unemployment rate reached unprecedented levels recently. Some 30% of Basra's residents are jobless according to the monthly report by the Middle East Institute.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The three aforementioned crises in Basra are connected with the spread of corruption in Iraq. According to the 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index report published by Transparency International, "Iraq is the 169th least corrupt nation out of a total of 175 countries." Corruption in Iraq has increased since 2015, and the country jumped from 161 in 2015 to 169 in 2017 in its position on the list of most corrupt countries (see chart 1).⁽⁴⁷⁾ Around \$361-500 billion is reportedly plundered from the general Iraqi budget over the course of ten years.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Chart 1



Protest demands:

The protesters' in Basra have demanded improvements be made to fix the issues of water and electricity shortages and unemployment and to end corruption and force the resignation of corrupt or inefficient government employees. Videos shared by activists on social media show protesters chanting slogans against almost all political factions, including the pro-Iran Shiite militias and government in Baghdad, and calling for them to be taken to courts on charges of financial and political corruption and the killing of protesters. Following an increased number of poisonings due to poor water quality, angry protesters also stormed government offices and the headquarters of political parties and Shiite militias (most prominently those of Iraqi Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Harakat Hezbollah Nujaba, Badr Organization, and Saraya Khorasani).⁽⁴⁹⁾ They set fire to the Basra governor's office, Iran's consulate headquarters of the Supreme Council of the Islamic

Dawa Party and the Islamic Virtue Party.⁽⁵⁰⁾ That led to clashes between protesters and the police forces, and the subsequent injury and death of several people.

Third: Government procedures to address the Basra crisis

- » Security procedures: Abadi ordered an investigation into the security forces responsible for protecting government buildings. The authorities imposed a short curfew and deployed 21,000 police officers to reinforce security.⁽⁵¹⁾
- » Unemployment: The Ministry of Education announced on September 10 that 1400 job vacancies existed, which is a part of 10,000 vacancies the government will create to tackle unemployment.⁽⁵²⁾
- » Urgent action procedures: Following his visit to Basra on September 11, Abadi announced a series of actions to resolve the crisis; i.e., committing financial resources to manufacture new water pumps and filtration projects, repair the RO Plant, pay overtime allowances to the employees of RO, curb the violations in water networks, assign a new Ministry of Water Resources to working collaboration with the Ministry of Oil, establish a pipe linking the Bada'a channel and a second pipe from the town of Qurnah to Shatt al-Arab, and hasten the hiring process.⁽⁵³⁾ He confirmed that the government had allocated \$109 million to address the water crisis in Basra, but reports suggest that the current government in Baghdad has used the allocated funds for this purpose to repay past debts (from 2016 and 2017).⁽⁵⁴⁾

Fourth: Political alliances and government policy points to mutual political exploitation

Sadr turned his back on Abadi:

Sadr disengaged from his ally Haider Abadi in the Reform and Reconstruction Coalition. In a televised speech aired on September 6, Sadr said, “we witness how some politicians neglect what is happening in the catastrophic governorates because they are busy with forming the largest bloc, which will not be any better off than the previous ones given the corruption, sectarianism, and injustice.” He called on, “the prime minister and other officials to take urgent actions to tackle the crisis immediately, else they shall resign.” He said an urgent parliamentary session should be held no later than September 9 where the prime minister and his cabinet members must attend to address Basra’s crisis, “otherwise, we will take a decisive decision that you may not think about. It will shake the thrones of the corrupt and those with sectarian quotas, and those who pushed the country to the brink of the cliff.”⁽⁵⁵⁾

Sadr blamed his ally, Abadi, for the snowballing crisis in Basra. He posted a tweet on September 7 saying, “I hope you don’t think that the Basra revolutionaries are just a bubble... quickly release Basra’s money and give it to clean hands to start at once with immediate and future development projects. And beware of complacency and negligence.”

Sadr called for a new face for the post of the prime minister. Apparently, he turned a blind eye to Abadi’s credentials as PM.

The question raised now is: Why did Sadr abandon his ally, Abadi? Is it because Sadr is an opportunist, seeking to dominate the Iraqi political arena by eliminating Abadi; or because Iran is placing pressure on Sadr to form a government that would maintain the Iranian interests; or exploits the situation in Iraq. Has Sadr been triggered by Abadi’s failures to address the growing crisis in Basra? Or have all the aforementioned snowballed into what we now have on our hands in Iraq!

Times reported that Sadr “appears to be moving against [Abadi] to position himself as the leading player in Baghdad.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ It further reported that Sadr appears to be seizing the opportunity to wield power—as the protests are widening the gap between the Iraqi Shias who support Iran and those who oppose it. If so, Sadr was seizing the opportunity to unseat Abadi. Sadr asked Abadi to leave the Islamic Dawa Party and to back off from re-election for a second term.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Nadim Koteich, a Lebanese journalist and political analyst, said that Sadr is eager to hold Abadi accountable for government failure in addressing Basra’s crisis. Abdi is thus an escape goat to cool simmering discontent in Iraq. “Sadr [also] exaggerated his support base to the U.S. to the extent that he even announced his commitment to U.S. sanctions on Iran,” he added. Sadr indirectly received messages from Iran’s allies that they support him to be the next prime minister. Hadi Amiri sent a letter to Sadr saying, “He withdrew his nomination for the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (Prime Minister) to open the door for an agreement between his party Fatah and Sadr’s Sa’eroun to elect the next prime minister of Iraq [implying that Sadr would take that role], according to conditions set by the Marja’yya.”⁽⁵⁸⁾ Amiri met with Sadr in Najaf on September 12, where they agreed to form a new government as soon as possible and expressed their commitment to the constitutional deadlines and conditions set by Marja’yya.⁽⁵⁹⁾

The position of Iraq’s highest religious authority (Marja’yya)

As the constitutional deadline to form a new government was just around the corner, Iraq’s highest religious authority (Marja’yya) stated that it did not support a candidate for the role of prime minister that was chosen from politicians that were in power in the past years, whether he was an independent candidate or a party representative because most of Iraqis had lost hope that those politicians were able to fight corruption and improve [living] conditions that Iraqis aspired to have. The Marja’yya laid down the conditions for electing a new prime minister, by saying that, “he must be a new face acting with qualification, integrity, strictness, and courage.”⁽⁶⁰⁾

Marja’yya plays an integral role in Iraq’s political scene. Its involvement in forming the new government is decisive. Given its deep-rooted religious significance, the Iraqi Shias follow the orders of Marja’yya. For example, Sistani passed a fatwa in 2014 to form the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to fight ISIS after it conquered a third of Iraq. Tens of thousands of young Iraqis responded to Sistani’s fatwa. Since 2005 the Marja’yya plays a significant role in shaping the Iraqi government. All previous Iraqi governments were approved by Ali Sistani.

Forming a new Iraqi government

According to the Iraqi Constitution, after the 2018 parliamentary elections, the parliament should have named Iraq’s new president, the prime minister, and speaker of the house on its first session held on September 3. However, tensions between the political coalitions and external considerations including foreign influences in Iraq led the parliament to only name the speaker of the house on September 15, Mohammed Halbousi, who secured 169 out of 296 votes.⁽⁶¹⁾

According to the constitution, the Iraqi president must be a Kurd. The elected president assigns the head of the largest parliamentary bloc to form a government. The expected candidate for the presidency was the head of the Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ) Barham Salih. The prime minister post was likely to go to a former Oil Minister Adil Abd Mahdi, a former head of PMF and Ataa Movement founder Falih Fayyadh, Planning Minister Ali Youssef Shokri, and Basra’s governor Asaad Al Eidani.

Ultimately, Mahdi assumed the post as new prime minister of Iraq.⁽⁶²⁾

Conclusion

1- The Basra protests turned from non-sectarian public demands to tackle the governorate's three crises into a political conflict. Protestors vandalized the headquarters of Shiite militias, governmental offices, and Iran's consulate.

2- The Basra protests forced Abadi to face three new challenges to be able to hold on to the post of prime minister:

- » Marja'yya that did not give credit to the candidates who were in power;
- » Abadi's allies who abandoned him and held him accountable for Basra's crises;
- » Amiri who aligned with Sadr and held Abadi accountable for Basra's crisis.

3- Marja'yya's new stance on the need to name a new face as prime minister has granted Sadr political immunity to be able to counter external and internal pressure that might have influenced the process of forming the new government if the Marja'yya had not stated its clear position on the matter.

4- The Shiites and Sunnis have been competing over forming the largest parliamentary bloc. The Kurdish parties retain and have won their designated 45 seats. The Kurdistan Democratic Party secured 25 seats in the parliament and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan secured 20 seats. Thus, the Kurds played a role in defining the form of the new government and specifically in appointing a new president.

Yemen

Iran's support for and Houthi hindrance to a peaceful settlement

Houthi rebels in Yemen continue to violate U.N. resolution 2216, having launched recently eight ballistic missiles against Saudi Arabia in September 2018. The Houthis have fired a total of 198 missiles into Saudi Arabia.⁽⁶³⁾

Indicators of Iran's involvement in Yemen

A number of Iranian experts and Hezbollah members were killed in clashes with the Yemeni National Army in the Maran front in the south-west of Saada, a military source reported.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Evidence of Iran's military involvement in Yemen is the remark of the advisor to Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Mortada Qurbani, who said, "Iran took control of the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea, as well as a number of strategic waterways, thanks to martyrs who are the young men of Hezbollah in Yemen and Lebanon, and to the Holy Shrine Defenders."⁽⁶⁵⁾ In comments from an RT interview in Tehran broadcast by Hossein Dehghan, Ali Khamenei's military adviser said, "Iran has no military presence in Yemen," adding as, "Iran can provide whatever the Yemenis might need."⁽⁶⁶⁾

Following its economic crisis and re-imposition of U.S. sanctions, Iran has reduced its funding to the Houthis and its proxies in Yemen. The Iranian public statements on Yemen have also urged for a Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani addressed the 73rd session of the General Assembly at the United Nations in New York on September 25, saying, "The crisis in Yemen can be resolved solely through intra-

Yemeni talks and without foreign interference. And to this end, we are ready to assist in any possible way.”⁽⁶⁷⁾ But Iran’s behavior and its militia proxy, the Houthis, show that they are not serious about the dialogue process; in fact, the Houthis did not attend the latest Geneva peace talks.⁽⁶⁸⁾ With decreasing Iranian funds, the Houthis have resorted to looting the country’s banks. Yemen’s Information Minister Muammar Iryani said that the value of the Yemeni riyal fell because the Houthis looted the Central Bank, traded hard currency and oil products in the black market, and used the plundered money in sectarian-military operations.⁽⁶⁹⁾ They also doubled taxes on basic food products, cut salaries for three years to fund their military operations, causing the harsh living conditions of average Yemenis living in areas under their control. Houthis also stormed the World Food Program (WFP) warehouse in Hodeidah, hindering the activities of the humanitarian organization. This has caused foreign investors to steer away from Yemen.⁽⁷⁰⁾

Houthis hinder Geneva talks

The Yemeni government expressed its willingness to achieve a political settlement by accepting the United Nations-led peace process. Houthis did not attend the latest Geneva talks and insisted that unless the U.N met a list of their conditions, they would derail the talks. These conditions included traveling to Geneva on Omani aircraft, transporting wounded rebels to Muscat and returning them to the capital Sanaa after the talks ended, according to Hameed Assem, a member of the Houthi delegation.⁽⁷¹⁾ “By 12 pm if the Houthis don’t leave Sanaa, I think the government delegation will decide to leave (Geneva),” a source from the Yemeni government delegation told Reuters.⁽⁷²⁾ Abdul Malik Al-Ajri, a senior Houthi delegation member, confirmed that the Houthis had laid down conditions to participate in the Geneva talks and were waiting for an Omani plane to transport them from Sanaa to Muscat, and though the Saudi-led coalition allowed them to make the trip, they insisted on also transporting wounded rebels to Muscat. It thus appeared that the Houthis were not serious about the U.N. sponsored peace talks. This was the second peace initiative the U.N. had sponsored after the Kuwaiti held talks on Yemen in 2016, which was also thwarted by the Houthis.⁽⁷³⁾

Yemeni National Army gains ground

The Yemeni National Army forces have achieved victories in clashes with the Houthi rebels, under the Saudi-led coalition air cover. They gained control over Dhaher directorate, north-west of Saada, after a large-scale military operation, in which Houthi rebels suffered massive losses. Top Houthi militia leaders were killed in the operations, most notably the commander responsible for arms supplies to the Houthis known by the name Abu Dia, who was killed along with seven others in addition to the command operation supervisor, Commander Hassan Ali Hassan.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Backed by the Saudi-led coalition, government forces besieged Maran, south of Saada, paving the way to retake control over it.⁽⁷⁵⁾

On September 17, the commander of the Saudi-led coalition forces in the southern Yemeni coast Ali Al Tanji announced that wide-scale military operations were carried out against Houthi-controlled territories and in Hodeidah. “The military operations by the Saudi-led coalition and the Joint Yemeni Resistance Forces gained control over the Kilometer 7 and Kilometer 10 zones, and entrenched their military presence at 16 km and cut off Houthi main supply route linking Sanaa to Hodeidah,” he added.⁽⁷⁶⁾ The army also controlled the airbase and its surrounding farms and the seaport at 16 km east of Hodeidah.⁽⁷⁷⁾

SWAT Houthi Commander, Major General Ali Mohammed Najji was killed in a raid by

Saudi-led coalition forces in Yemen. Also, assistant to the commander of Central Security Forces Mabkhout Saleh Salamah and commander of the Elite Force Ali Ahmad Mouwdi and Mobilization Officer in Hajjah Governorate, Khamash Mahdi Al Abdai, were also killed in an airstrike by the Saudi-led coalition. ⁽⁷⁸⁾

Houthis threatening international navigation in the Red Sea

The Yemeni Navy, backed by the Saudi-led coalition, foiled an attempt by the Houthi rebels to target the international navigation in the Red Sea using a bomb boat. The boat was moving more than 35 miles per hour when attacked by an international trading ship. ⁽⁷⁹⁾ The Red Sea is strategically significant for Iran. The Houthi rebels are guided by Iran to take control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. For its strategic coastline, stretching 442 km along the Red Sea and the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait, Yemen is indeed Iran's main gate to the Red Sea. Iran controls the Strait of Hormuz already and strives hard to have a firm grip on the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait by supporting the Houthi rebels to take complete control of Yemen and its high seas. Securing completely the Red Sea is strategically significant for Iran also to achieve one of its expansionist goals, which is to ultimately occupy four Arab capitals, i.e. Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa, and turn into the only strong active player in the Red Sea region.

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INTERNATIONAL AFFAIR

US-Iran Relations

Escalating exchanges and the impossibility of dialogue

US-Iran relations continued at the same rate of escalation in the month of September 2018 amid US tenacity to exert the highest level of pressure on Iran. The Trump administration aimed to renegotiate the nuclear deal and a number of controversial issues, mainly, Iran's regional behavior and ballistic missile program. On the other hand, Iran refused to negotiate with the Trump administration in light of the pressure that might deprive it of many of its strategic cards and gains.

Continuous pressure and threats

The United States believes Iran poses a threat to its interests and to regional stability. In its annual report, the US State Department said that Iran was the "Number one state sponsor of terrorism" and that the "IRGC and its partners are playing a destabilizing role in the armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen". The report attacked Iran for supporting terrorist groups such as Hezbollah.⁽¹⁾ At the beginning of September, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo raised the concern of reports that indicated Iran had transferred ballistic missiles to Iraq despite Iran's denial.⁽²⁾



Earlier, the United States warned Iran of threatening its interests in the region. The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo said that the United States would respond decisively to any Iranian backed attacks on US interests. Pompeo's comments came in response to the rocket attacks on the US mission in Basra suspected of being launched by Iranian-backed militias at the beginning of September 2018. In a statement released on September 2018, 11, the White House blamed Shiite militias for the attacks and said that Iran did not stop the proxies it had supplied with money, training, and arms in Iraq.⁽³⁾

The members of the Republican Party introduced a draft law to impose sanctions on Iranian-backed terrorist groups in Iraq, especially Asa'ib Ahlollah and Hezbollah Annojaba. The draft law required the State Department to make an annual list of Iran's terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria for the threat they pose to the region and the world. Indeed, these developments exert more pressure on Iran in these two countries where it has great influence through its proxy militias.⁽⁴⁾

The United States has warned airlines to be careful of any conflict that might erupt at any time when flying over Iranian territories and to use Iraqi airspace as an alternative. The United States renewed its warning to its citizens of traveling to Iran for the possibility of being confined in this country.⁽⁵⁾

The United States was determined to frustrate any efforts to circumvent sanctions on Iran, which was evident when the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo said that the United States would not allow the European Union (EU) or any other party to undermine sanctions amid EU plans to set up a special mechanism to circumvent US sanctions on Iranian oil exports.⁽⁶⁾

To face Iran's cyber activities, an American website announced canceling 143 accounts for users posting topics supporting Iran and criticizing the United States and Israel, like the step taken by Facebook, Google, and Twitter. In its statement, the website said that a group of Iranian-linked users had been posting news in conformity with Iran's position, criticizing the US policies in the Middle East, and criticizing Saudi Arabia and Israel.⁽⁷⁾

On September 2018 ,25, the speech of President Donald Trump at the UN General Assembly reflected his consistent position on the nuclear deal as the worst agreement ever signed by the United States. This means that the United States is determined to fix the international pact or exert the highest level of pressure on Iran to force it to accept the broader new terms than the JCPOA signed by Iran and the P1 + 5 group in 2015.⁽⁸⁾



On September 2018 ,26, President Trump chaired the meeting of the Security Council and delivered a speech, asserting that the nuclear deal had allowed Iran to continue developing nuclear weapons. He said the next phase would result in sanctions at the beginning of November 2018. Finally, President Trump threatened to impose stringent

sanctions on any individuals, countries, and companies that will not respect US policy on Iran.⁽⁹⁾

On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meetings, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the US National Security Advisor John Bolton, and the US envoy to Syria James Jeffrey chaired an international meeting including the GCC countries and Yemen to discuss the Iranian issue. In this meeting the US officials underlined the following points:⁽¹⁰⁾

1. The Iranian regime uses false and unrealistic slogans such as supporting Palestinians while it supplies armed militias in the region with billions of USD.
2. Iran has paid no more than \$ 20,000 to Palestinian refugees while it has paid hundreds of millions of USD to armed groups.
3. The Iranian regime has paid \$ 20 billion to its proxies while young Iranians cannot find jobs.
4. Tehran has paid billions of USD in support of terrorism and has supplied militias such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Houthis with arms and equipment.
5. The Commander of the IRGC Al-Quds legion, Qasem Suleimani is leading a gang of militias, destabilizing other countries.
6. The Iranian regime is fueling conflicts in the region.
7. 2500 Iranian soldiers and 10 thousand elements of sectarian militias exist in Syria.
8. Iran supports the Houthi rebels to launch ballistic missiles on Saudi Arabia.

Accordingly, the US officials said that the United States would take the following steps:

- » Develop a strategy to face the IRGC.
- » Prevent the Iranian leaders from continuing their policies toward the Middle East and to exert more pressure on Iran to stop its destabilizing activities in the region.
- » Prevent Iran from transforming Syria, Iraq, and Yemen on the lines of the Lebanese model in reference to the Iranian-backed militia, Hezbollah that enjoys great influence in Lebanon.
- » Work with its allies to cut off IRGC funding.

In the same context, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo held a meeting in New York with representatives of the Gulf States, Jordan, and Egypt to form a security alliance to face the Iranian threat. Some observers referred to this as a potential “Arab NATO” to face regional challenges and instability. The meeting also considered continuity of the military exercises conducted by these countries in the past months.⁽¹¹⁾

Despite US threats of regime change and sanctions strengthening the internal crisis in Iran, the US officials announced that their goal was to modify Iran’s behavior but not to change the regime and that they were ready to negotiate. This means that sanctions might have been prepared in advance to force Iran to modify its behavior rather than regime change. In the same context, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo said that President Trump was ready to hold constructive talks with any representative of Iran at the UN General Assembly in New York on September 2018 ,23.⁽¹²⁾ The US special envoy to Iran, Brian Hawke said that the United States was interested in negotiating a new treaty with Iran, including its ballistic missiles and nuclear program.⁽¹³⁾

The statements of the former US Secretary of State, John Kerry about his meeting with Iranian officials and providing advice to them incurred much criticism. The Trump administration considered Kerry’s statements as subversion against US foreign policy and an attempt by Kerry to undermine Trump’s efforts to force Iran to fix the flaws of the nuclear deal considered by the Trump administration as the worst ever in the

United States history.⁽¹⁴⁾ Kerry described the nuclear deal as “Historical” and said that the United States had not succeeded much in its policy for regime change. He said that the will of the current administration to change the Iranian regime was the main reason for the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.⁽¹⁵⁾

Iran’s betting

In response to Trump’s speech and the US demands of signing a new treaty in compliance with US terms,⁽¹⁶⁾ the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani reaffirmed his country’s commitment to the nuclear deal and denied further negotiations out of the JCPOA. He said that the United Nations should not allow the United States to undermine its role and legitimacy. He expressed his satisfaction with the international community position on the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Rouhani defended his country’s policies and denied all accusations of sponsoring terrorism and tried to portray Iran as an important party in regional stability in response to these accusations. In fact, Rouhani and Trump did not reject dialogue, but their speeches and their countries’ policies show the opposite.⁽¹⁷⁾

Rouhani’s speech was commended inside Iran. For example, the Secretary-General of the Guardian Council, Ahmed Jannati said that Rouhani’s speech was full of pride and courage. Recently, Rouhani has been trying to please conservatives who have exerted significant pressure on him and hold him responsible for the failure of the nuclear deal and all its economic consequences on the country.⁽¹⁸⁾



However, the US pressure continues to undermine Iran’s economy. By the end of September 2018, the Iranian national currency suffered new devaluation- 18000 Tomans per USD- exerting more internal pressure on the Iranian regime. Indeed, the United States counts on this situation to change the Iranian position on the negotiations process.⁽¹⁹⁾

To avoid this scenario, the Iranian regime is making intensive efforts to face sanctions and try to preserve the nuclear deal signatories- other than the United States- and big companies’ commitment to their obligations with Iran.

In this regard, in his meeting with Hashmatullah Flahat Bisha Chairman of the National Security Committee in Iran’s parliament on September 2018 ,2,⁽²⁰⁾

the British Assistant Foreign Minister, Alistair Burt affirmed his country's support for the survival of the nuclear deal as an important treaty for cooperation between Iran and Europe.

In the same context, Japan's oil, gas, and mineral resources Director Ryo Minami said that Japan was looking to import oil from Iran as a security requirement. He called on Japanese governmental refineries to get waivers from US sanctions as Japan aimed to preserve buying the same quantities of Iran's oil rather than lowering the amount.⁽²¹⁾

At the end of August 2018, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif visited Pakistan and met its new Prime Minister, Imran Khan who expressed his country's willingness to improve relations with Tehran. The Pakistani Foreign Ministry announced that both sides exchanged fruitful ideas regarding economic and trade cooperation and improving cultural relations.⁽²²⁾

As for India, it expressed readiness to face the consequences of US sanctions on Iran, but, according to Indian officials, it is in the "wait and watch" state until the whole picture comes clear concerning this issue.⁽²³⁾

In addition, Iran threatens to use the regional security and stability card to force the European countries to make greater efforts to preserve the nuclear deal. This was evident by targeting the US consulate in Basra in Iraq,⁽²⁴⁾ and launching airstrikes on the Kurdish opposition headquarters in the Iraqi Kurdistan province on September 6, 2018,⁽²⁵⁾ as well as, the threats by the Chief of the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Akbar Salehi in the meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) when he said that the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal would have a negative impact on regional peace and security.⁽²⁶⁾ On September 13, 2018, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif threatened to increase uranium enrichment in case Europe takes a negative position on the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal.⁽²⁷⁾

All in all, the US and Iranian positions are far apart. The United States insists on Iran's submission to its terms while Iran is gambling for time and the possibility of US failure to resume the same level of sanctions as pre-signing the nuclear deal to get out of the current impasse. In addition, the imposition of the second set of sanctions in November 2018 targeting Iran's oil sector might threaten the stability of the Iranian regime. However, not excluding dialogue and understanding by both sides might constitute a meeting point between them to reach a new agreement and avoid the worst possible scenario represented by military confrontation or indirect escalation in the hot points in the region.

Britain-Iran Relations

Dual Nationals as an Instrument of Political Pressure

This part of the report covers the latest developments in Britain-Iran relations. It handles the impact of the UK Foreign Ministry's statement that warned dual nationals from traveling to Iran, as well as, its relationship to the political pressure Iran is exerting on Britain.

Iran's regime does not enjoy strong relations with Britain. Relations between both countries have been unstable because of disagreements over a number of regional and human rights issues. In 2011, relations between the two countries severed because of an attack on the British Embassy in Tehran. In 2015 the moderate, Hassan Rouhani succeeded to the presidency and resumed relations between the two countries after



receiving a congratulatory letter from the British Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, calling for re-setting relations between the two countries. Cameron's letter was welcomed in Iran and it sought to improve political and economic relations with Britain after signing the nuclear deal. Iran was one of the first to welcome Britain's potential exit from the European Union, as it saw this as an opportunity to boost cooperation, particularly in trade and energy as an attempt to win an influential political ally in Europe and the Middle East. However, Iranian expectations evaporated when Cameron was succeeded by Theresa May, who was much more critical of Iran's policies in the region.⁽²⁸⁾

After the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Iran resorted to the European countries to save the international pact, especially Britain. Britain vowed to support Iran's energy sector and improve trade relations. However, with the second set of US sanctions on Iran fast approaching in November, no real action has been taken by both countries to mitigate the negative consequences of the sanctions. As a result, Iran has resorted to its natural policy of threatening the European countries to restore its nuclear program in case it did not receive sufficient guarantees post sanctions. Nevertheless, Iran's relations with Britain have taken a different approach from the relations with the other European countries.⁽²⁹⁾

Political talks between Britain and Iran concentrate on several regional and human rights issues- especially the Syrian question, Iran's continuous destabilizing practices in the region, and its missile program. In September 2018, dual nationals who are imprisoned in Iran without clear charges figured prominently in the talks between the two countries. Some sources have said that approximately thirty dual nationals have been imprisoned in Iran without clear charges over the last two years, most are US, British, and European citizens, as well as Iranian citizens. Iran charged them with communicating with foreign countries without clear evidence such as the Iranian-British activist, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe who works for Thomson Reuters, a Canadian media firm. She was arrested at Tehran airport while on her way to leave the country about two years ago. She was accused of involvement in a coup d'état attempt in Iran.⁽³⁰⁾

On September 2018 ,19, the British Foreign Ministry warned Iranian-British citizens from traveling to Iran and said that the Iranian government did not recognize dual nationals. Later, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Jeremy Hunt said, “London cannot accept the arrest of innocent British citizens by Iran to use them as an instrument of political pressure”. He added, “When I met Iran’s Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, I told him that our policy on Iran has not been shaped yet and that if they think they can use those prisoners as an instrument of pressure, they should be responsible for the consequences of their actions.”⁽⁵¹⁾

The British Foreign Ministry said that Iran did not recognize dual nationals. In fact, there is no evidence or article in Iranian law that denies Iranians the right to be dual nationals. In addition, Iran has not shown any evidence incriminating the dual nationals of spying or attempting to destabilize the country. Hence, Iran is using the imprisonment of dual nationals- as an instrument of political pressure on the European countries and even the United States. It tries to use this card to obtain guarantees from the European countries, especially Britain, to protect Iranian interests after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal.

Indeed, Iran is playing several cards to exert political pressure on the European countries, particularly, Britain. This can be noticed in the statements of some Iranian officials who have on the one hand accused Britain of conspiring against Iran in Iraq, and on the other hand, pressured it to buy Iranian oil or else, it will resume its nuclear program. Iran is expected to raise the level of accusations and demand Britain, later, to show good intentions by providing guarantees on protecting the Iranian interests after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and resumption of sanctions.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Domestic Affairs

» Iran's project to Islamicize the study of the humanities and the development of university curricula faces a real crisis. This crisis may blow up this plan in the wake of the failure of the revolution to advance a workable ideology.

» There is a widening gap between the generations in Iran, especially between the youth and women who want to keep abreast of technological and information developments, and the ruling elite which still believes in revolutionary ideologies and state jurisprudential control. The latter wants to shape scientific and university discussions in Iran according to its vision and ideology, which many in Iran reject.

» In light of these dynamic developments and changes, it is difficult for the Iranian regime to crystallize its visions and concepts on the post-revolutionary generation, especially in light of state economic and political failures that generate social explosions and widespread criticism of the government. This makes it difficult for the regime to impose any internal policy of containment of dissent, even when such dissent is mixed with religious standards, including recent anti-government protests by clerics.

» Mehdi Karroubi, through a letter to Khamenei in December, proved that he still believes in the principles of the Iranian regime despite what he has been subjected to over the past years living under house arrest. His criticism comes as part of the call to reform the regime from within, not to overthrow and confront it.

» The Council of Experts cannot influence the decisions and policies of Khamenei or control his performance given Khamenei's absolute and utter control over the institutions of the Iranian regime.

» Karroubi's criticism may not lead to any change in the policies of the supreme leader but will increase the discontent of Iranian public opinion towards him.

» Iran is currently facing security challenges after the Ahvaz attacks, the first of which is the refusal of many media outlets to classify the attack as a terrorist operation. Tehran has tried to exploit the political figures that are influential in the country to turn to social networking to condemn the attack as an act of terrorism. The attack also caused great damage to the status of the Revolutionary Guards and given its failure to prevent the attack, causing people to become fearless since the powerful apparatus is no longer enjoying the same power it may have had before.

» Ahvaz is the most important economic zone in Iran. To a large extent, the Iranian economy and the people's everyday life depends on the region's stability.

» The region supports the Iranian economy in all economic areas including agriculture, irrigation, energy, food, and logistics.

» The regime may exploit the Ahvaz attack to fragment the domestic opposition in Ahvaz and to assassinate its figures abroad. It may also conduct strikes overseas to serve regional agendas.

» Any attempt to stop the flow of the resources of the Ahvaz region (oil pipelines, for example) to Tehran is more dangerous to the stability of the regime than U.S. sanctions.

» Iran's oil exports fell in September to below 2 million barrels a day for the second

straight month.

- » Iran plans to invest in the port of Gask in the Sea of Oman to export oil through the Straits of Hormuz to the high seas.
- » Iranian exports to Iraq increased by about 30% during the first half of this year compared to its counterpart last year.

Arab Affairs

» Marathon talks for forming the biggest bloc in parliament in Iraq have entered the stage of shuffling cards. It is a stage marked by political fluidity. The formation of the new Iraqi government came after Abadi's closest ally in the Reform and Construction coalition refused to name him for a second term as prime minister. The top Shiite religious authority in Iraq declared his refusal to forming a new government depending on former government officials. Also, Abadi's foes, the Fatah alliance and State of Law coalition, allied themselves with his allies. The Kurds expressed resentment at the possibility of forming a new government headed by Abadi. Finally, Iran exerted considerable pressure to form a government that guaranteed the Iranian interests in the region.

» The Idlib agreement is at a stage where the forced displacement of fighters and change in the demographic makeup of Syria is taking place in favor of the Shiite Crescent forming to support the Assad regime through the redistribution of population in Syria.

» The regime of Bashar, Russia, and Iran committed the crime of forced displacement against one of the most important regions for the Syrian people. They systematically and sequentially violated the rights of the Syrian people to their land. They are now carrying out a widespread massacre in areas inhabited by 3.5 million Syrians in Idlib, according to several analysts.

» The three parties, Turkey, Russia, and Iran, have not been able to reach a solution to the Idlib crisis in light of Iran's participation in the Sochi talks, its adoption of tougher positions on Syria and its attempt to storm Idlib, regardless of the human toll that could result from its operations.

» The success of Turkey and Russia in reaching an agreement to establish a demilitarized zone in Idlib was subject to the absence of the Iranian actors from the negotiating table, which did not fully materialize.

» There are doubts about the extent to which an Idlib agreement could be implemented by the three parties in light of Bashar's rush to wipe out the Syrian opposition. He enjoys a strong position after increasing the swathes of land that he controls in Syria and clearing extremist and terrorist factions within the Syrian opposition.

» In Yemen, Iran's influence is shrinking. The Houthis are siphoning off the Yemeni banks and money given the economic plight of the Iranian regime which suffers from financial hardship and is reducing support to its ally in Yemen. This came following the U.S. and Gulf pressures on Houthis to distract them from Iran in an effort to build peace.

International Affairs

» The developments in US-Iran relations give the impression that the crisis between them continues and that the two sides are ready for dialogue. But the starting point of the dialogue is the bone of contention. While the U.S. wants to sign a new treaty, among other vital issues, to address Iran's regional role and the ballistic missile program,

Iran wants the dialogue to be part of the joint action plan and on the basis of Security Council resolution 2231.

» The United States seeks to coordinate with its allies to tighten sanctions against Iran and to confront its presence and military deployment in the region. It is working also to press or persuade Iran's partners to compel it to abide by the U.S. position to contain Iran through sanctions. In return, Iran is trying to keep the nuclear agreement and its gains through diplomatic and political efforts to convince companies and countries to continue their trade and investment relations with Iran.

» Iran has warned that the continuation and tightening of sanctions may be a threat to international peace and security. It is also trying to fill the vacuum left by U.S. policy with countries like China, Russia, Turkey and some EU countries that have differences with the United States, with regard to how best to manage Iran, i.e. through confrontation or negotiations.

» Iran exploits several cards to exert political pressure on European countries and the United Kingdom in particular. This can be seen in statements by some Iranian officials in the Iranian newspapers, which accuses Britain of plotting and planning against Iran in Iraq and demanding it to continue to buy Iranian oil and support the Arak reactor or to support Iran to resume work on the nuclear program in Iran.

» Iran seeks to increase accusations against the UK to demand goodwill from the UK through guarantees to protect Iranian interests after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the reinstatement of sanctions.



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